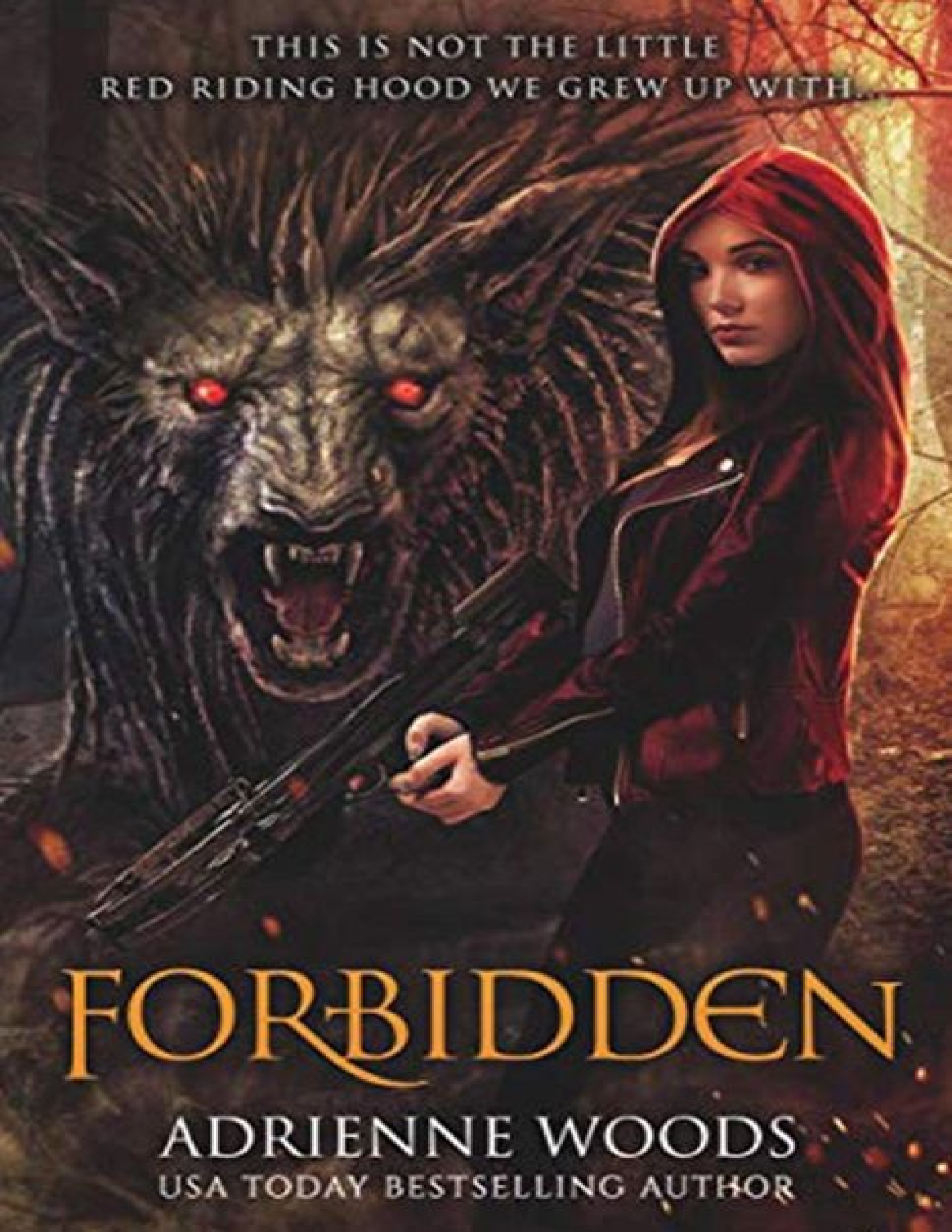


THIS IS NOT THE LITTLE  
RED RIDING HOOD WE GREW UP WITH...



# FORBIDDEN

ADRIENNE WOODS  
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# FORBIDDEN: A LITTLE RED RIDING RETELLING

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GUARDIAN OF MONSTERS SAGA  
ADRIENNE WOODS

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Adrienne

love

Adrienne.

# ONE

“RU!” My sister yelled my name. “Ru! RU!”

I couldn’t see her. I couldn’t even see the forest filled with Dad’s traps ready to spring on the pack we were hunting tonight. Only darkness. A pit of blackness.

I panicked. Have I gone blind? Sudden blindness during a hunt spelled only one thing: my imminent death.

“Ru!” Yells reverberated around me. Among them the voices of Uncle Fernus and my father, Huck, more distant than that of my sister.

My brother and cousin were too far. Both were fantastic snipers, who slayed one wolf after another across great distances with Silver Nitro bullets.

“Ru!”

Abruptly my sight came back, so fast it disoriented me. My sister leaped into the air like a prima ballerina, with perfect grace and long limbs. With silver swords clutched in both her hands, she was magnificent to behold.

I tore my gaze from her and focused on her target—mere inches from me.

The wolf was snarling and rattling like they always did.

Most people only thought they were story fillers. But stories got them wrong.

They didn't have fur; in fact, there wasn't a patch of hair on their bodies. They didn't look like wolves, either, but they hunted in packs, killed in packs.

Their bodies were covered in a rubbery, silicone-ish substance, shaped in long snakelike tubes on their heads and backs. Oversized ears framed their faces, which sported long, razor-sharp fangs meant to rip humans in half.

The tubes made a sound that struck fear into one's soul. They rattled like vipers, only ten times enhanced.

The tubes on the one near me were going apeshit.

I did what any human would—though I was far from one—and covered my head with both arms.

The sound of a sword slashing through a leathery torso cut the rattling off. My sister's war cries rose into the night.

More slashing, snarling, screaming, and growling—then nothing, only the sound of my sister's hard panting.

If I were to look at the werewolf now, there would be a human in its place. They always shifted back to their human forms with their last breaths.

A hand grabbed my arm and yanked me to my feet.

"What is *wrong* with you?" My sister's eyes were deranged. Fear reflected in those big blue orbs. "Why didn't you jump out of the way? Why didn't you use your weapons? What the hell happened? You never freeze."

"I don't know!" The adrenaline pumping through my veins was wearing off, replaced by dismay. *What would have happened if Lizzy hadn't saved my ass?* The question weighed heavily in my gut.

She pulled hard and I smashed into her body. She wrapped her arms around me. She was shaking, and I realized I was too.



I couldn't tell her that I'd blacked out, that I'd lost my sight. It would've been simpler if I could. But telling her would incite only fear.

If they knew, they wouldn't allow me to join the next hunt. Hunting was all we knew. It was in our blood, in our Chaperon lineage. If my father learned what had happened, I would never hunt again. The mere thought made me hunch over and hurl.

I SHOOK my head to clear it. The memory was still vivid, as if it had happened two hours ago, not two years ago. Two years had passed since my life had irrevocably changed.

If it had only been a sign of going blind, I would have been able to deal with it. But it wasn't. It was much worse. My family still had no idea that I had inherited Grandma Marie's crazy gene.

I saw things that made no sense. Things that filled me with anxiety. Things that hadn't happened yet... but impossibly, things that always came to pass.

It was hard to verbalize. It fell in the same category as magic. I struggle to wrap my mind around that it truly existed. Which was why I didn't tell anyone. Those who raved about magic got locked away in padded rooms. Like Grandma Marie.

Now, I wasn't sure she had been crazy. Like me, she used to zone out. Claimed to see things too. Things that made her burst into tears when she voiced them. And when that happened, we all stared at her with wide eyes filled with sympathy. Poor, crazy Grandma Marie.

She died in a psychiatric hospital. I was the only one who felt guilty about it.

She had been my favorite grandmother. Despite her idiosyncrasies and babbling, she'd had a heart of gold, and when she

wasn't seeing things, she epitomized every grandchild's dream.

She'd played with me when my sister went to the academy. She'd made me dolls with adorable little outfits. We'd played for hours while Uncle Fernus and Dad hunted with various teams.

Werewolves were real; they were the reason Dad had pulled us all from public school, from society, as nobody would believe a word if we ever mentioned it.

My father worried too much as it was. I didn't want to add to his burdens. If he found out I was experiencing Grandma Marie's symptoms, it would overwhelm him.

I found ways to deal with it on my own.

Luckily, whenever it was about to happen, there were warning signs. It started with a mild headache, similar to a fatigue-induced headache. Then dizziness.

I'd trained myself to listen to my body, to use my time wisely. When the headaches started, I rushed to safety and solitude. By the time the dizziness hit, I was already high in a tree during hunts, in my room when we were at home, or pretending to be asleep when we were driving.

Then I felt pulled into a realm that made zero sense.

In the beginning, I was pulled into visions of hunts. In each one, we died.

The first time it happened, I found myself around a fire with no recollection of how I'd gotten there. Blinking in the orange light, I was overcome with concern. Was I going blind? Had I passed out? Had Dad had taken me on some trip thinking I was asleep? But why couldn't I remember waking and sitting on a log in front of a fire? Maybe the blackout was responsible for the memory gap. I felt out of it, but I was there. But why was I blacking out and going blind

and losing chunks of memory? It made no sense. Was I coming down with some serious disease?

Nearby, Will and Theo badgered each other amicably, Lizzy toasted a marshmallow on a stick for a s'more, laughing at my brother and cousin's jokes. Dad and Uncle Fernus talked about the hunt. None of them paid me any attention.

I didn't see the wolf pack watching us.

It happened so fast.

They grabbed Theo first and dragged him into the woods. His screams were real. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I shivered.

Will, with his fast reflexes, leapt to his feet and tried to free my brother. Two other wolves materialized and attacked him. He went down, his screams echoing through the air.

My sister was already doing her thing. She killed one but struggled with the next.

My father finally succeeded in grabbing his gun from the tent and fired off Silver Nitro bullets. Some of the pack fled, but others stayed.

Uncle Fernus knifed one in the abdomen. It was their only vulnerable place and the fastest way to kill them.

Meanwhile, all I did was stare at the raging battle. I didn't even move when one of the wolves jumped me.

I screamed as I woke in my bed.

Just a nasty nightmare.

That was the first vision. At the time, it had made no sense. But a week later, we were camping at the exact spot I'd dreamed of. Everything played out exactly as it had in the nightmare—Will and Theo badgering each other, my father and uncle talking about the hunt, Lizzy with her marshmallow.

I'd never experienced déjà vu. It wasn't amazing. Far from it. We were going to die.

For some reason, I couldn't voice it. Instead, I turned my gaze to the woods.

They were out there.

Wordless, I prepared: I positioned the gun beside Dad without him noticing. I made sure Lizzy had an extra sword at hand. I stood and watched where the wolf would come for Theo.

When it happened, I didn't freeze. I was ready.

That night, I realized Grandma Marie hadn't been crazy. What had she seen in her lifetime? All I knew about her visions was that they freaked her out. They'd left her crying and mumbling incoherently for days. If my visions came true, then hers probably had as well.

Because of my preparation, we didn't die that night. No one knew what I had done, but the only reason we'd survived the situation was my vision, not their alertness. I didn't disabuse them of their notions. I was too scared of the vision.

I had eight more visions about hunts after that. Every time, I managed to change the outcome.

In time, the visions changed. They no longer featured hunts. I saw a war—one in which humans weren't involved. A war of creatures, many unknown to me. A war I didn't want to be part of. A war with no end.

AS THE VISIONS INCREASED, sometimes I tried to ground myself with simple facts that couldn't change, facts to help me return to reality. In the present, they went something like this: *My name is Ru Chaperon. I am the youngest of three siblings. My*

*brother, Theo, is twenty-five. My sister, Elizabeth, just turned twenty-one. I'll be eighteen in a few months.*

We were members of the Supernatural Hunting Association. The SHA was a large network of hunters who eliminated creatures that didn't belong in our world.

Our task in the vast network was to kill a single breed: werewolves. If we stumbled across some other monster, it was guaranteed other hunters were in the area fulfilling their task.

We honored other hunters' territories. We didn't know how to kill creatures beyond the ones we were assigned—stories and myths rarely reflected the truth—so we focused only on werewolves. Almost from infancy, we learned everything we could about them; we honed the skills we needed to stay alive. We graduated from training at sixteen.

Whereas normal hunters belonged to shooting ranges or hunting clubs, we belonged to the SHA. It was founded in biblical times. Each generation belonged to the Association, keeping the existence of these creatures a secret and protecting humans. Most of the founders had no more descendants. They'd died off; some had never even started their own families as the job was their life.

Some bloodlines came to be regarded as royalty. Most of the folklore had originated from them. They were not mere fairy tales; they were hidden truths to protect the innocent.

One such tale was "Beauty and the Beast." In the real version, the Beast was a werewolf and got no happy ending. Belle Dejaun slaughtered him after she learned what he was. Did she love him? Hell yes. But he was cursed; at every full moon, an uncontrollable demon emerged. Belle had discovered too late that her beloved Christian was a wolf.

"Hansel and Gretel" were real witch hunters from Germany, brother and sister. Their ordeal with a witch in a gingerbread house was all true. Each bore a line of descendants who went on to be fantastic at hunting witches. They had to be, since most of what witches could do couldn't be seen with the naked eye.

"Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," "Rapunzel," and many others were not true. All fabricated to confuse which stories contained nuggets of truth.

"Little Red Riding Hood" was where we came in. Eva Chaperon was the real Little Red, or in the original French, *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*. She existed, and she was no damsel in distress. She didn't need some lumberjack to rescue her—she *was* the lumberjack. The closet was an addition; only the villain shifting from human to wolf form.

The wolf? None other than her own grandmother.

If one were to reread the story with this in mind, one would discover the truth concealed among the fictional embellishments.

Some earlier generations of hunters theorized that Eva's red cloak possessed magic that allowed her to disappear in dangerous situations. Modern hunters scoffed at the notion. Then again, I saw things that hadn't happened yet, so I couldn't rule out the magic cloak. The garment had vanished, lost in the sands of time. Rumors persisted for a while that Eva had been buried with it, but she was once exhumed and this had turned out to be a lie. Others speculated it was guarded deep in an SHA vault, but Dad called this bullshit, reasoning that the SHA would've handed such a key weapon over to our family as Eva's direct descendants.

Liz was a lot like Eva. Fearless, clever, beautiful, brave. The SHA believed she was the reincarnation of Eva.

Growing up, it was hard to compete with that. *You should be more like your sister, Ru. Be as fast as Elizabeth. Think like Lizzy. What would Lizzy do?* I'd suffered comments like this throughout my childhood. No wonder I didn't feel like a true Chaperon hunter.

Dad had been born into this life. He'd tried to escape it. Tried to give us all a normal life. But once a hunter, always a hunter.

The monsters had found us. They killed my mother.

I was two at the time. My brother, sister, and I spent most of our time with our grandmother.

When Theo came of age, he joined the SHA and went to the academy. A few years later, Liz signed up. Eventually my turn came.

The SHA taught me about all kinds of monsters—where to find them and how to stay alive. Although the focus for Chaperons was werewolves, we gleaned some basics about other monsters too. For example, vampires existed and were superfast and superstrong. Luckily, the SHA had developed weapons to take them down. All one needed was sharp eyes, quick aim, and the mental agility to think two steps ahead of them.

At times, I was glad we were stuck with hunting werewolves. Vampires were way scarier. Witches too.

Both my father and my uncle were renowned among hunters. From time to time, other hunters would come to us for assistance to take down mixed covens. Attacking mixed covens was generally the only time we teamed up.

My brother and cousin carved out their reputations in the SHA. Will was popular with girls, and Theo was the shy one.

Theo and I were alike in that regard.

As for Elizabeth...

She was the chosen one.

*The* Eva Chaperon.

Sometimes I envied her. She wasn't merely skilled like Eva—she was stunning, too. She bore our mother's beauty, where as I had been endowed with Dad's genes. We were opposites—we didn't even look like sisters. She was tall and lean, could eat anything she wanted and stay slender. I was short and muscular. Silky blond hair flowed in waves down her back, her blue eyes sparkled, and her skin was flawless and fair. I had brown hair and dark eyes. My hair wasn't like hers; what I had could hardly be called hair, more like thin feathers that had lost their shine long ago.

She looked like she belonged on runways, not running around in forests like a mad samurai. The boys of the Association were all over her, though none of them caught her interest.

My sister had everything. She had no idea how lucky she was to be the best at everything without even trying.

If the Association did have Eva's cloak, without a doubt they'd hand it to her sometime in the future. Probably with a freaking ceremony.

Before the visions, I rarely felt like a member of my own family. I wasn't good with a gun the way Theo and Will were. I wasn't strong like Dad and Liz. I wasn't as fast as Uncle Fernus. Always lagging, out of place. The only normal one among supernatural beings.

Then the visions started and I found my role in the hunt. Foreseeing events. Contributing something that mattered.

Over time, it became easier and easier to manage them during a hunt. But keeping my condition a secret while simultaneously helping my family unnoticed... That was much harder.



## TWO

I SAW him before he came into our lives. A vision, not of a hunt, one that played out at home. We were all sitting on the porch on the farm. Dad and Uncle Fernus were fixing the truck, fiddling with the engine, and kept telling Will to turn the ignition.

I was reading a book while Liz chattered on the phone with Megan, a member of a different hunting team.

Megan was around Liz's age and was obviously enamored with Theo.

We'd met her team only a few weeks prior. They hunted vampires. Dad had invited them back to the farm after the joint hunt went successfully.

It was fun hosting other hunters, swapping our best action tales, sharing expertise on what was—and wasn't—effective against the different creatures we specialized in. Less fun but still special were the moments spent toasting fallen hunters.

To kill vampires for good, they had to be burned. Rumors persisted that some vampires had special abilities, and, Megan's team shared conspiratorially, one in particular could wield fire.

Several of my war visions were filled with, surrounded with, overwhelmed by that element. Fire.

An unfamiliar, brand-new truck turned into the driveway and rumbled toward us, trailed by a steady cloud of gray gravel dust.

Dad and Uncle Fernus wiped their hands on a dirty cloth and my cousin climbed out of the truck. I slid my bookmark into the pages of my novel. Liz cut her call with Megan short.

Theo was in the house, shotgun in hand, ready for anything.

It sure would be a dire mistake to think we'd be easy targets.

"Ru, Liz, get in the house."

"Dad," Liz whined, even as I was already on my way into the house.

"Do as I say," he warned.

She galumphed morosely behind me.

Theo leaned against the kitchen window, watching through the sheer white curtain panel. Liz took up a position right beside him, eyeing the vehicle as it pulled to a stop.

"What do you think—"

"Shh," Theo said.

Liz sighed but shut her mouth.

The door of the expensive-looking truck opened and a hot guy around Theo's age got out.

"Hubba hubba," Liz quipped.

"Shh." Theo looked angry.

"What?" she snapped. "He can't hear me."

My brother shook his head without taking his eyes off the stranger.

The passenger door opened and another big guy got out of the truck.

They approached my father and uncle, hands extended.

Surprisingly, my father and uncle shook their hands. Unease trickled over me. This was a vision, and whenever I had visions about my family, it meant death loomed.

I regarded the newcomers with hawkeyed scrutiny, like my brother, and wished I could hear what the dark-blond-haired guy with the gorgeous smile was saying to Dad.

"He is *smoking*," Liz whispered.

I gave her a stern look. She'd never spoken about any guy like that.

"What do you think they want?"

"I don't know. Be quiet," Theo growled.

She shut up as we watched the interaction between the four men.

They looked like hunters.

The handsome guy did most of the talking, often flashing a dazzling smile. After some time, they all shook hands again, and the strangers returned to their truck and drove away.

Watching them leave, Dad pulled out his phone and put it to his ear.

Theo and Liz flew through the kitchen, out the front door, and down the porch steps, clamoring for an explanation. I followed. But before we were told who the visitors were and what they wanted, I woke up.

I blinked, willing the remnants of the headache pounding against my skull to recede.

My father would have a conniption if he knew I was seeing this stuff and not telling everyone. But I didn't care. We all had a vital role to play, and I was grateful to have found mine at last.

The strangers didn't portend something terrible. They were friendly. What bothered me was having no idea who they were, who my father called so urgently, or when it all would happen.

Would my sister finally meet the Adonis of her dreams? But no, that didn't seem important enough for a vision. I wished I could ask

my father about them. That was the hardest part about my secret. I couldn't talk about anything I saw, because it hadn't happened yet.

I had to be patient and wait for the black truck.

A FEW WEEKS passed but the strangers didn't arrive. More visions came, but none featured the strangers.

Some were about the war, fire engulfing everything, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was related to the mythical vampire Megan's team had spoken about. Was she real? If she could pluck fire out of thin air and manipulate it, how on earth would anyone be able to kill her? Would sunlight work?

Finally, the day arrived. I didn't pay attention to detail that day, and I wasn't sitting on the porch when my sister stomped through the door mumbling under her breath that she was practically an adult.

My brother stood at the kitchen window with a shotgun in his hands.

"What do you think—"

"Shh," Theo said, exactly like the vision.

I approached the window and peeked out.

The expensive black truck slowed to a stop. The hottie and the giant got out and greeted my father and uncle. Will stood against our truck with his arms folded.

I'd waited for this day. At last, I could ask what the hell they wanted.

"Hubba hubba," my sister said.

"Shh."

Déjà vu. It was becoming a good friend, warning me when danger was near. Warning me when change was about to come. In which category did these men fall—danger or change?

"What? He can't hear me."

My brother shook his head without taking his eyes off the strangers. The stark familiarity was surreal.

It always was.

I skipped giving my sister a stern glare.

When they said their goodbyes and left, I was the first to hurry out.

"Seriously?" Liz yelled as I rushed through the door and off the porch.

My siblings followed me.

Dad was on his phone. Who had he called?

We had to wait for Dad—we knew better than to interrupt a call that might be hunt-related. Impatient, I watched gray dust coat the tall grass of the front field as the truck drove off our property.

"Who was that?" Theo asked our uncle.

Fernus didn't seem to hear, his full attention on Dad.

"Will?" Theo prompted, to similar effect.

At last, Dad ended his call. He nodded at Fernus.

"Are they from the SHA?"

"Seems like it. Roger confirmed that about a month ago, a hunting team of the Dejaun bloodline arrived from Georgia. Papers are legit, bearing the crest and seal."

"Dejaun?" Liz voiced my surprise.

"Yeah." Dad shrugged. "Roger said the boys offered to go through all those tests to prove they weren't supernatural."

"Wow," Uncle Fernus said.

"There's something about the one I don't like," Will muttered.

"They're hunters, son. You won't find one who doesn't have a dark past or hasn't seen something horrible that made them snap. We need all the hunters we can get."

Which one was Will referring to? The blond guy seemed amicable enough.

"What do they want?" I had to know.

All my family members looked at me in surprise. I hadn't spoken since my first vision. I was too timid to ask about something that hadn't happened yet. And too obsessed to participate in unrelated chitchat. Instead, I had chosen silence.

My sister's arm twirled around my neck. Of course my going quiet, only speaking to my siblings in my visions, never in real life, had been hard on her. On them all.

Dad grinned. "I'll be sure to thank our new friends for making you talk again."

"Dad, please." I rolled my eyes. "What do they want?"

"They want to hunt in this vicinity and need our help."

"Help with killing?"

"Something about hunting an Alpha." My father's expression and body language were rigid; he didn't like this and didn't trust them. He wasn't stupid. He'd do what he always did to look out for our family.

After a brief silence, Theo asked, "Which Alpha?" He sounded as puzzled as I felt. Every pack had an Alpha. Who were they after?

"He didn't say." Dad's eyes got even tighter. "I told them I'd confirm some details before we contact them with an answer." He was always careful about revealing too much. A good habit.

"And you got your confirmation?" Liz asked. She sounded giddy—she wanted to see the hot guy with dark blond hair again, of course.

Without a doubt, he would be smitten with her.

"Yes," he said. "I will contact them, and Fernus and I will dig up everything we can about this Alpha they're looking for. You girls must not mention this to *anyone*. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," Liz said, way too fast.

"Ru?"

I nodded.

"Good." He smiled. "Again, Will. Start her up."

And with that, they returned to their Saturday ritual of working on the truck.

A FEW DAYS LATER, Dad and Uncle Fernus met the mystery guys. The four of us stayed behind.

No new visions had arrived in the meantime. I was annoyed. Liz couldn't stop blathering about the hottie to Megan on the phone.

I'd probably start dreaming about him too—not visions, just subconscious stirrings instigated by Lizzy's incessant rambling. Sure, he was gorgeous. From-another-planet gorgeous. Nonetheless, I planned to stay far away. When my sister wanted something... well, I'd learned the hard way not to stand in her path.

She would always win, no matter the stakes.

If I was honest with myself, she wasn't the pain in the ass I often tried to make her out to be. She was a sweetheart. Not only was she good at everything, she never did anything wrong. She was skilled and damn fast. And she always helped out around the house. She could cook, clean, and kick ass. Hell, she didn't even have a temper. Zero flaws.

She always pushed herself to do her best. Lizzy said we were all unique in our skills and that our only worthy competitors were ourselves and our own pasts. Moving forward was sort of her thing, that and becoming the best version of herself.

I wished I were so together. True, I was unique. Sometimes, I wanted to confide in her. Tell her Grandma Marie hadn't been crazy.

Share the reason for my silence. Recount the times I had repeatedly fended off death for all of us.

My foresight was driving a wedge between me and my family, and I was back to feeling like I wasn't a real Chaperon.

What was it that let me see into the future? Whatever it was, it comprised part of who I was. The only way to stay out of a mental hospital was to guard my secret and use it to my advantage. And keep my family safe.

A honk announced my father and uncle's return.

My siblings and cousin leaped to their feet. With less enthusiasm, I followed suit.

We all settled on our favorite chairs on the porch. My father took the swing with me and wrapped his arm around me, squeezed me, and planted a kiss on my temple.

"So, what is the job?" My voice was hoarse from disuse.

"It's dangerous and strange, but after Collin explained it to me—"

"Collin?" Liz interrupted.

"Yes, Collin and Jared. Their hunting team is about twice the size of ours."

"What?" we all said in unison. It wasn't unheard of, but a team that large was rare.

He smiled.

I marveled, "Everyone in his family is still alive?"

"It seems that way, peanut," he said. "I'm glad you're talking again. You had me worried there."

"So, this Collin," Theo insisted.

"They're rounding up werewolf hunting teams to help them track down the Alpha."

"Of which pack?" Theo sounded as annoyed as I felt.

"Of the werewolves."



We all gaped at him.

"Wait, what?" Liz asked as his insinuation clicked.

"They're not unlike the SHA, Lizzy if you think about our structure." Admiration crept into his voice. "Collin and his family know more about werewolves than I think even the Association does."

"The werewolves have an Alpha? An Alpha over the entire werewolf population?" she asked.

"Yeah, the first of them all. Still alive, still wreaking havoc on humans. Collin wants to find him and end him."

"How can we do that?" Liz scoffed.

"That's the strange part. He wants our help to *capture*, not kill."

## THREE

MY EIGHTEENTH BIRTHDAY was nothing special; Dad cooked dinner, Liz baked a cake, and we held a quiet celebration, as always. Dad gave me a stunning crimson vest to wear when hunting. Wolves would see me from a mile away. And then I understood: he wanted to keep an eye on me.

Discomfited, I smiled and thanked him. Our first meeting with the other hunters came a day after my birthday. I felt uncomfortable all day. I hadn't received a vision of this night. Unsure of what the outcome would be, I went silent.

My father didn't like it. He had no idea what kind of worry I carried.

Their safety was everything to me. I wasn't as fast as Liz or a great shot like Theo, but I had a role to play. One that refused to work now, when we needed it. It made me feel... defective.

Collin sent Dad the coordinates of a compound. We headed out as the sun began flirting with the horizon, buttery rays deepening to gold.

When we received the invitation, I had assumed it would be an informal get-together, but now that seemed unlikely. Collin had told us to bring ammo and every scrap of silver we could get our hands on. Besides, the moon was nowhere near full in its cycle. Since

werewolves only turned during full moons, I found this to be strange. Why now?

I was with Will. Something about this hunting group didn't click.

Liz's mind was already clouded by the mere image of Collin.

My stomach turned. My body was coiled, ready for the worst. My instinct yelled ambush and my body agreed.

My mind countered with rationality. Why would hunters kill hunters? We were all working to eliminate danger and protect humankind.

I watched, hoped for a warning sign for a vision. No twinge of a headache, no dizziness, no reprieve from the question marks that faced us. Nothing.

Dad took an off road into a heavily forested area. We were accustomed to the woods; it should have felt banal. But as the sunset crept toward twilight, my trepidation increased.

After a few winding miles, the outline of another truck appeared. My eyes widened—not one truck, dozens of them. They were all parked in groups in a meadow deep in the forest.

Liz whistled under her breath. "Holy crap."

"These are all werewolf hunters?" Theo asked in disbelief.

"Looks like it."

Dad signaled to Uncle Fernus and Will in the truck behind us, then parked under the tree closest to the path we were on. Always the strategist. My uncle parked opposite us, his tires quiet on the asphalt.

We got out and walked over to where the other hunters, probably fifty or so, were gathered.

Some faces were familiar; Dad and Uncle Fernus greeted people with warm exclamations about how they hadn't seen each other in

ages. As they shook hands and embraced people, Liz and I stood quietly a few feet removed.

"Oh, my word." The woman who exclaimed this was tall and lean with sculpted arms and dark hair in a messy bun. "Is this little Theo?"

"In the flesh," my father boasted. "Liz, come here."

I sighed, trying to hide my envy. She was always the first to be introduced while I lurked in the shadows.

Awkwardly, I approached as Liz basked in the attention. Spotting me, Dad put his hand on my back. "And this is my baby. Well, she's not a baby anymore. Ru."

"Goodness, Ru... The last time I saw you, you were in diapers." On closer inspection, her hair was peppered with gray. She was beautiful, decked out in kickass leathers and boots with a tank top.

"Ru, this is Emily Watson. She's one hell of a werewolf hunter."

"Your father is such a flatterer. I'm no different from the rest of you. Just doing my job."

I smiled at her.

She looked at my father, an unsure smile stretching across her face.

"She's not much of a talker, but that's our Ru."

Liz careened full speed into conversation, bombarding Emily with questions about techniques and worst-case scenarios. My sister, forever on the lookout for information with the aim of self-improvement.

Emily's eyes sparkled; she was clearly enjoying Liz's enthusiasm.

A guy next to Emily spoke, and I yanked my attention away from her for the first time. "What do you think of this proposal to capture, not kill?"

I inched closer to my father, abandoning Lizzy's bubbly conversation for the more somber exchange between the two men.

"I must admit," Dad said, "I can't see how it could be possible."

"This group is advanced." The man swept out an arm. "Roger says they have an engineer who creates new contraptions and weapons for them all the time."

Their discussion circled the topic of Collin's hunting team, vast in number and unfathomable in strength. Even so, how on earth were they planning to capture werewolves? *Why* did they want them alive?

A chill ran up my spine. What sinister secrets might Collin's past hold? He'd appeared friendly that day at the farm. Dad had always said, though, that all hunters suffered traumas, all were affected to some degree by the horrors of the job, all had a dark side. He'd be no exception.

Did he loathe wolves so much that he tortured them before killing them? It was hard to imagine such vehement hatred.

Sure, we had no love for the wolves, either. They were sadistic. But when we killed, we killed. We didn't play with our targets. After all, they would escape or worse, kill one of us. Why would they want to find the Alpha of all of them—and take him alive?

Dad was right. No way was this harebrained idea possible.

THREE BRAND-NEW, pitch-black trucks pulled up and came to a stop where all the hunters were milling around restlessly. Burly men—and a few women with attire like that of Liz and Emily—got out. Collin was among them. My sister's lips tugged upward and her eyes zoomed in on the leader—or at least, I assumed he was the leader.

One of the older men threw this assumption into doubt when he clambered up to stand in the bed of one of the pickups. With a high-pitched whistle, he called everyone's attention. He was rather skinny for a hunter, close to Dad's age, with dark, curly hair that reached his shoulders and a mustache adorning his upper lip. His eyes—as dark as his hair—were friendly.

When the group had settled down, he cleared his throat. "My name is Greg. Thank you all for coming."

Nods, murmured hellos, and tentative smiles trickled through the group in reply.

"I know most of you think we're nuts for wanting to capture werewolves alive. But I promise: if you do it our way, all our travails will be history. We recently discovered that a single Alpha dominates all the wolves, and each pack Alpha submits to him, as opposed to each Alpha holding absolute autonomy as once believed."

Murmurs greeted this. It flew in the face of centuries' worth of knowledge and training.

Greg allowed the ripple to die. "He has been off the grid for a long time and we need all the wolves, and I mean all of them, so we can find out where he is. If we kill the Alpha, every wolf will die. He is their main creator. I strongly believe a single hunting team is insufficient for this task. We need everyone's help."

A woman raised her hand.

"Ma'am?" Greg smiled.

"How do you expect us to capture them?" Her question struck the vein of concern that ran through everyone's minds. "They are skilled at getting out of contraptions. They'll turn right around and kill us instead."

"Not with our contraptions." He grinned confidently.

Collin and the guy who had accompanied him to our farm joined a few other younger men and opened the cab of one of the vehicles. They took out a silver chest and opened it to remove a silver net. It caught the scant light and dazzled us all. It was... otherworldly.

My hand searched for my father's without taking my eyes off the net. He squeezed my hand as Greg explained how the net worked. The silver in the net contained and weaken wolves for a period of time, allowing them to dose the wolves with tranquilizers. He held up a syringe filled with bright blue liquid. "*This* is called Stra-vain. It forces werewolves to shift back into their human form. Except when the moon is full."

"What do you mean except when the moon is full?" someone to the left called. "That's the only time they shift."

Greg held up another vial, this one containing a brownish-red liquid the color of tea. "Ravain, the opposite of wolfsbane. A few years ago, the werewolves scientifically developed a method to bring the beasts out at will. You're looking at the accelerant." He slid the vial back into his pocket.

"How do you know all this?"

"I'll answer that in a few minutes. But first, let me explain our plan to trap them."

He went on to explain that trucks would be waiting close by after the wolves had been hit with the Stra-vain. The trucks would be staffed by members who either weren't of age yet or weren't skilled at hunting; they just needed to be able to drive. Once the wolves were in their human forms, they would then be transported to a nearby facility to be interrogated about the location of their Alpha.

"They won't give something like that up easily," Uncle Fernus pointed out.

"They might not to you," Greg said with a hint of smugness, "but we have ways to make them talk."

"And if they speak in Wolvain?" another member asked.

Wolvain was what the SHA called the language the wolves spoke.

"It's called Mahur," Collin answered. "It's an ancient language."

Greg looked at his feet, the smugness solidifying into a smile.

"How do you know these things?" my father asked.

Greg tilted his head at Collin. "Collin can speak it."

"What?" a couple hunters exclaimed, amid gasps of surprise.

"He can speak it *fluently*."

Collin averted his eyes and walked toward the truck.

"Collin was lucky," Greg said as we all settled down. "When he was little, a pack killed his family... including his mother, my sister. There was another pack nearby. A dormant pack. A she-wolf came to his rescue. She brought him home and raised him as her own."

More gasps and murmurs of surprise rippled through the crowd.

I flicked my gaze to see how Collin reacted to such a secret being shared, but he'd slipped away while Greg was speaking.

"What?" my father asked. I could tell from his tone that he was having a hard time believing this story.

"I know it sounds farfetched, but if you're skeptical, ask yourselves this: how does he understand their language? It's not easy to learn, and I promise, no university teaches it. Fluency by immersion is the only explanation. In a way, Collin was one of them."

"A human living with a pack of werewolves?" another asked.

Greg sighed. "I searched for him for years. A few years back, we ran into his pack... It wasn't easy, but thankfully, he's safe now, and he's right where he belongs."

"That's why you know so much about werewolves, isn't it?" Emily asked.



"It is. Collin knows it's a curse. He agreed to help us track down the Alpha if we spared his pack."

A discordant chorus of voices rose: "What?"

"Regarding what we all believe about them... Collin was raised by a pack, and they did an okay job. I promised I would do my best not to harm his pack. We need to find the Alpha and free all the innocent people the Alpha turned. The boy and I have a mutual understanding. If any of you do not want to take part in this, you're free to bow out. No hard feelings."

One team of hunters left, the leader spitting in Greg's direction as he passed. "This is a disgrace to the SHA. You call yourself a hunter?"

"I do, Bob, one of the best. But I value life and free will, which none of these werewolves had when they were changed."

"Bah." Bob waved Greg's words away without looking back as he and his team stormed off.

I looked at my father. His jaw was set and determined. I knew that look.

We would not be leaving. It was time for a change. And with that came a slew of new things we needed to learn. Especially one: how to capture a werewolf without getting killed.

## FOUR

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, Greg's hunting team taught us how to work their fancy equipment.

I didn't like most of their ideas, as they generally entailed using some of us as bait.

Human bait.

Greg had promised snipers at all times, that no one who was acting as bait would get hurt, that his sons were great at what they did.

To my horror, Greg wanted Liz to be bait.

Fortunately, I wasn't the only one terrified by this proposal; my father wasn't happy about this either. But when Greg explained why she was perfect for it, I saw his point... though I was still wary.

My sister was beautiful. A picture-perfect damsel in distress, but one who was fast on her feet with quick reflexes.

Liz didn't seem perturbed; in fact, she seemed to love the plan, probably because Collin was one of the guys who would always be close by, stepping in if she was in danger.

I didn't get to be bait; I didn't even get the choice. My limbs were too short, I wasn't fast enough, and the plain truth was that I wasn't interesting enough to lure wolves into a trap.

Theo and Will were tapped to be snipers. Theo was a great shot, but one of Greg's members beat him in the last practice shot. Theo

missed the bull's-eye at 2,500 yards but the guy he was paired with, Tanner, hit it perfectly. They both scored among the top of the shooting division.

I didn't make the sniper team either. I could shoot well, but only at close range. I was skilled with knives, axes, swords—anything for hand-to-hand combat. That kind of fighting was dangerous but it was where I excelled. It was also where I'd failed numerous times.

No, nothing glamorous for me: Useless Ru got assigned to the trapping team—operating nets with remotes—which was nowhere near as cool or exciting as my siblings' tasks.

But at least being on the trapping team meant I'd be okay if I received a vision.

Because the thought of getting a vision while running for my life was terrifying, I embraced my duty with open arms. Better to stay on the sidelines than risk my own death in the fruitless attempt to entice one of the beasts.

The trapping team's training wasn't as grueling as that of the other teams, but it wasn't easy, either.

Greg drilled it into us: we were the most critical team. Ultimately the mission depended on us. No matter how flawlessly the bait and snipers performed, we were the ones on whom success or failure hinged. Our task was the most important one: releasing the nets at the right time. It would take knowledge and gut instinct.

As for those who were going to be bait? None would survive if we weren't on top of our game. We needed to play our part perfectly. Lee, one of Greg's daughters, as well as two of his sons and one of his nephews, were on the bait team. He had personal stakes like the rest of us, which went a long way toward my beginning to trust him.

One wrong move, one slow reaction, could cost my sister's life, or that of any of the others I was getting to know and like. This reality had me praying no vision befell me during a hunt.

It also made me wish that I could tell someone about my gift, could tell them that I was an asset, but I couldn't.

The weight on my shoulders grew heavier and heavier. The more anxious I became, the harder it would be to hide my fears from my father.

"RU," my father said.

I looked up. My fork scraped over the porcelain of the plate as I pushed my food around, my appetite nonexistent. I sighed.

"What is with you lately?"

I shook my head, willing myself not to look him in the eyes.

"Are you worried about tomorrow's hunt?"

I nodded.

"Talk to me, Ru. Use your words."

"It's not like you're in any real danger, Ru," Liz said. "You don't have to run from them."

I shook my head, scowling. "It's not that. Believe me, I would gladly take that run with you if I could."

It was the most I'd spoken in weeks, and I felt my family's eyes on me as I refocused on my plate.

"Then what is it? Something is eating at you. Since—" Liz stopped talking and I glared at her.

"Since that night you almost died. It's been two years, Ru. What happened that night? And don't tell me it's nothing like you always do. Something happened, and it kills me that you don't want to share it with us. With me."

I wanted to. "I don't know what happened. Maybe I'm not cut out for any of this." I pushed away from the table and rushed to my room.

"Ru!" Theo called.

"Let her go, son. She'll tell us when she's ready." Concern was thick in my father's tone.

I shut my door behind me and collapsed on my bed with a deep sigh.

This was messed up.

No matter how hard I tried to hide my secret, they would find a way to drag it out of me. I needed to tell my Dad something, but what could I say? That I wasn't cut out for this? That would be a straight-up lie, because I was... in my own way.

If Dad ordered me to sit out on future hunts, it would send me into spiral of darkness, because then I would be truly worthless, useless to the cause.

I loved the adrenaline, loved the excitement, but I was terrified of getting another vision during a hunt, especially one where my sister was the bait.

I groaned into pillow. My father wouldn't let this go, not with the hunt being so close.

A knock came at my door.

He and I were so alike.

I rolled off my bed and trudged to the door to open it.

His hulking figure filled my doorway.

I stepped aside so he could come in, and he took a seat at my desk chair, drumming his fingers on my desk as he waited for me to sit.

I dropped down on the edge of my bed and tried to school my features so my face didn't betray my worry and sadness.

"Is it true? The way you feel?"

*Think, Ru, think.* I looked past him. The silence was heavy, deafening, as I contemplated what to tell him.

"I don't know, Dad," I finally said. "Liz is fast, strong—"

"Everything she can be, Ru. You know this isn't a contest."

"I know." I sulked. "I feel so out of place in this family, Dad. You and Uncle Fernus are fantastic shots—so are Will and Theo. Me? Sometimes I freeze up and I don't know what to do. What if I freeze on this hunt, Dad? Liz could die!" Tears formed in my eyes—genuine ones. Despite the rivalry, there was no escaping the fact that I loved my perfect damn sister.

"It's my job to worry about that, Ru, not yours. Concentrate on what Greg assigned to *you*. Nothing more."

"It's not that simple." I rubbed my hands hard over my face.

"What's going on here?" he pressed. "This is more than cold feet."

"It's not," I said too quickly.

He sighed. "What Liz said is true, and you know it, peanut. You changed that night. Since then, you've become less talkative, more anxious. I can't help if you don't tell me what's going on."

I shook my head. "Like I said, I feel out of place."

"Do you want to sit this one out?"

"No, please don't make me. I love hunting. I love the thrill. Besides, it's natural to feel this way. Like, she *is* my sister."

"There's a reason everyone at the SHA calls her the new Red," he said in a consoling voice. "She's brilliant at what she does. You can stop worrying, okay?"

I nodded as if it could be easy to stop worrying. Nothing my father said eased my fears. I might have a vision when I needed to be on high alert, and that would compromise the entire mission—

everyone would be in danger if my vision decided to come on at that moment.

He got up from the chair and kissed my head.

"We'll be okay. I promise."

I nodded, and my father left.

Tears flowed from my eyes. I couldn't contain my frustration anymore. My secret was a heavy burden to bear alone.

My family would never understand. They chucked Grandma Marie into a freaking institution because of her visions. They'd do the same to me. Why of all people was I the one to inherit her ability?

As much as it had changed my life for the better, I hated it. I hated that it could lead to the death of one of my siblings if my visions butted in at an inappropriate time.

And if there was anything in the world I loved more than reading and hunting, it was my family. I wouldn't be able to cope if my secret led to one of their deaths.

THE NIGHT of the hunt finally arrived. My uneasiness was at an all-time high.

In the days leading up to the hunt, I tried to be more talkative, but I hadn't had a vision, and it only served to increase my trepidation.

The nights before the hunt were filled with planning and training... and with Liz and Collin getting better acquainted.

It was easy to see that Liz was infatuated. The fact that he had been raised by a pack of werewolves intrigued, rather than repelled, her. She wanted to know everything there was to know about him.

It shouldn't have bothered me that my sister was taken with him, but something about this guy made it difficult to trust him. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

But she was smitten and it looked like he was smitten with her, so I pushed my feelings toward him to the back of my mind.

We sat around the towering bonfire. I hated these bonfires. Tomorrow night, the hunt would happen, and without my visions, I had no idea whether we'd be successful.

I was watching Liz, unblinking, trying to work through the uneasy feeling I had about Collin, when it happened.

The headache hit me right between my temples, and I tried to suppress a groan from the pain, because it was ten times worse than usual.

"Ru..." my father and sister said.

I groaned from the piercing pain. I got up, pushed past them, and muttered that I was okay. I stumbled toward my tent, but before I could get inside, the dizziness hit me like a tornado and I collapsed into my tent.

My family wouldn't come check on me; after all, I'd told them I was fine. I waited for the dizziness to pass and watched as the image in front of me changed.

I thought of it as the pull.

At first, it nauseated me because everything around me swirled and when it stopped, I wasn't where I should've been.

I was standing in the middle of a battle. On one side were animals. I couldn't make out the shapes, but their shiny eyes were unmistakable. There were hundreds, thousands, of them. Out of the darkness, one stepped forward.

I froze.

Werewolves.

*Does this mean we won't succeed?* I thought, panicked. That our plan was a suicide mission, that we would lose the ones we love?



On the other side was a vast group of vampires—creatures with burned faces and some that looked almost human. A shiver ran up my spine.

One who looked like a man, though probably wasn't, walked closer. Another followed. They both had dark hair and captivating eyes. These two super-handsome humanlike creatures had the visage of siblings with so many similarities in their features.

They walked past me, their tread soft rather than mighty. I ran after them to hear what they would say to the werewolves.

One of the creature-men addressed a werewolf who stood a few paces ahead of the vast horde. The man spoke in Wolvain—or Mahur, as we'd just learned the real name of the werewolf language. I didn't understand a single word, but his tone was unmistakable. He wasn't threatening; rather, he was pleading for something. Begging them not to fight?

The wolf remained in a low crouch. All those near him were growling. Their distrust of the man-who-wasn't-a-man was evident.

He wasn't a vampire. Vampires were pale and their eyes were red. These two men could pass as humans.

Was he their Alpha?

If so, would this vision reveal why we would fail to capture him?

The gentle creature was patient; he wasn't here to fight, he was negotiating. His hands were raised in defense, his body language screaming for a treaty, for peace.

But the wolves didn't want peace. They wanted blood, wanted vengeance. Again, there was no need to understand their words to comprehend their slaverling, clawing at the ground, and growling.

I didn't want to see this battle. I didn't want to stay here and be part of this.

It hurt whenever I got attacked by a wolf, or died, in my visions, like it was real. As if that pain served as a reminder that I needed to use this ability to change the course of what I'd seen.

I backed away. It was no use listening to their words, so staying would be unhelpful. But maybe I would be allowed to explore before I emerged back into consciousness...

In the corner of my eye, something was running toward me, far in the distance. Fast. A light blur moving closer and closer.

Then chaos: many things happening at once. The wolf attacked the negotiating man, whose companion pushed the wolf away.

The wolf landed gracefully on his feet, snarling and baring his teeth before renewing his attack.

Just when I thought he was about to rip the negotiator apart, the blur jumped in between the wolf and the negotiator. The wolf grabbed the blur, ripping into it. Chunks of flesh flew through the sky until the wolf finally backed away.

I blinked as the scene cleared.

The blur was a wolf.

Another wolf and a vampire ran into the center, though both arrayed multitudes remained in position at each side of the battleground.

The vampire lifted the injured wolf and took off toward the vampire side at lightning speed, so quick I almost missed it.

My human legs couldn't match the pace, but it didn't matter anyway. A large, glowing silver orb appeared and covered the gathered vampires.

Sight and sound abandoned me.

I stopped in my tracks and took in the vast structure. It was blinding and emanated a muted hum. I reached out and touched it.

It was solid, vibrating against my palm. I quickly pulled my hand away.

What was this?

Improbably, it seemed like a sort of shield—something straight out of superhero graphic novels. Megan and her family had gossiped about vampires with special abilities, but was it possible they were responsible for this grand thing?

The dome disappeared and a man's agonized scream penetrated the night.

It was the negotiator.

My head snapped toward the sound.

At breakneck speed, one of the manlike creatures shifted into wolf form and howled. One by one, every wolf gathered for battle howled in response.

The sound burrowed into my heart. Sadness gripped me, and tears formed in my eyes.

I didn't understand. How would a wolf be behind enemy lines?

The negotiator was on his knees, cradling a woman in his arms.

Her injuries were extensive, but that wasn't why the wolves were howling. The woman was dead. She was the blur—the wolf—who had jumped between the negotiator and the attacking wolf.

I suddenly realized why the man was so tormented. He loved the she-wolf.

A black wolf ran toward the scene and rubbed up against the man, then rubbed herself against one of the vampires.

I frowned. Why would a werewolf show affection to a vampire?

The vampire touched the wolf and she shifted into her human form.

She pulled on the dress the vampire held out and crouched next to the crying man. She tried to soothe him, but he shrugged her off.

Again, words were unnecessary to understand—his pain was so immense, nothing could comfort him.

The body he clung to emitted a faint glow. Small, silver, transparent orbs of smoke rose from her, hitting the man with so much force, he let go. The orbs bashed him relentlessly, and he screamed.

Thunder boomed, causing me to leap back in surprise. The skies mimicked the grieving man's cries.

The earth trembled. Grass, sand, and grit thrummed wildly. Upon closer examination of the man, his face, his body, the rhythm of his shuddering body, it hit me: *he* was controlling the tremors.

How the hell was he doing it? Fear crept into my soul.

Everyone around him begged him to calm down, based on their supplicating gestures, but his jaw and eyes were set in implacable determination—though it was impossible to divine what he intended.

The woman's death fueled him with hatred, though both instinct and the tenderness with which he had held the woman suggested he was not a man familiar with violence.

His hands lit up with flames as he jumped up from the ground. I retreated as he passed me and approached the werewolves, his face contorted in a menacing grimace.

The vampires shrieked, bellowed their war cries, and followed him.

The man released balls of flame, one whooshing after another, each orange mass slamming into a wolf and engulfing it in unearthly fire.

Terror cascaded through me, watching this, but I couldn't tear my eyes from it. Some of the werewolves retreated. The ones who stayed didn't have a chance.

Lightning struck four, five times in quick succession, downing wolf after wolf.

The earth rumbled, and I struggled to keep my balance. Strong gusts of wind swept me off my feet, the bellowing of air muting everything else. I spun in the air, catching snatches of the growing light of fires and sparks of electricity.

The man, the one who had tried to negotiate with the werewolves, controlled the elements.

I gasped as my eyes opened. Back to my reality. I coughed and hacked and pushed myself onto my haunches to allow air into my lungs.

The tent flaps rustled as someone rushed through the small door.

"Dammit, Ru! What's going on?" My sister kneeled next to me, stroking my back, worry emanating from her in waves.

"I'm okay," I panted.

"This is *not* okay. What is happening to you?"

"Nothing, Liz. Leave me alone." I pushed her away and clambered out of the tent.

My brain was foggy, still stuck in the vision. It had been so clear. As if I were right in the thick of the action.

I stumbled to the closest tree and leaned against it, nostrils flaring as I breathed hard. My father called my name, but I ignored him, shoved away from the tree, and walked off.

That man's sorrow, his rage... The lightning and the fire and the quaking earth... It had all felt so real. I could still feel it.

No wonder everyone called Grandma Marie crazy.

I found a heap of stones and sank down to them, resting my head in my hands with a shaky sigh.

At least the vision hadn't arrived during the hunt.

Footsteps approached from behind.

"I'm okay," I groaned, sure it was my sister wanting to force me to tell her what was going on.

"I know," said a male voice.

Collin? What was he doing here?

I pulled my knees to my chest and hugged my legs. "Sorry. Thought you were Liz."

"She's worried about you, Ru."

He knew my name? That was a surprise.

"May I?" He pointed to the rocks beside me.

I nodded. "Liz didn't follow you?" The words came out with the tang of jealousy—not what I'd intended.

He shook his head. "No, I asked for some privacy. They all want to know if you're okay."

"I am, so you can tell them I'm—"

"What did you see?"

My mouth fell open and my eyes went wide with shock. "Excuse me?"

"I've seen this behavior before," he said. "What did you see?"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

He smiled. "You know it's dangerous if it happens during a hunt. You could die. Others who depend on you could die."

"I'm fine," I hissed. I got up and stormed off.

"I'm only trying to help," he called after me.

"I said I'm fine," I bit out, not daring to look back.

*Shit, how does he know?* Where had he seen someone experiencing visions? Was this a common gift among other SHA members? He acted like it wasn't a big deal... But he didn't know my family.

No way could I admit I'd seen a vision; and it was out of the question to share the ghastly details. He'd be crushed to learn his

plan was doomed and countless people would die in the execution of the plan he had designed himself. I couldn't bear such bad news, couldn't make that gorgeous face twist with hopelessness.

Better to deny everything.

My family would lock me up in an institution if word got back to him. That was certain.

But Collin had a point. If this was how my visions would be from now on—vivid, taxing, lengthy—they posed a grave danger to us all.

## FIVE

I SAT high in the tree, clutching the device that would control the net. I was the backup—only needed if one of the other members of the net team, like my father, my uncle, or Emily, missed their chance.

The image of the werewolf that had saved the negotiator's life in my vision flashed through my mind. She had been faster than any wolf I had encountered. If that was their true speed, we didn't stand a chance.

My sister was bait tonight. The wolf would catch her. There was no way she'd be able to outrun it. She'd die if Collin didn't know what he was doing.

We'd been waiting for hours.

What if Lizzy was already dead?

It was so quiet. Collin had told us that the wolves had superior hearing, so we couldn't make a peep.

I had to admit, he wasn't nearly as annoying as I thought he would be. Even though he knew the danger I was in, he kept my secret.

A truck came barreling through the trees at full speed. This wasn't part of the plan, and it put us all on high alert.

Liz was on the back of the truck, holding a gun. She peered up at me as it whizzed past. Her concerned eyes told me that these



wolves were fast.

In our hunts, we had never chased the wolves. We would always wait for them, then fight like hell to kill them.

The tell-tale rattling echoed through the night, and the blur of darkness quickly gained momentum.

The nets would set him off. He would choose a different direction. I had a tranquilizer gun filled with Stra-vain, ready to shoot him and force the transformation. I wasn't a great shot, but I could handle this.

I prided myself on my excellent, but the wolf zoomed in and out of range so quickly, my eyes couldn't keep up with it. I had to tip my hat to vampire hunters. They had to be fast, like hypersonic fast, because vampires were much speedier than wolves.

Squinting my eyes, I lifted the gun, trying to predict where it would go next.

I aimed at the opposite side and pulled the trigger.

A split second later, a ruckus exploded. Something hit the turf and the sound of the first net swirled into the night, followed by another.

Realizing it was trapped, a furious growl ripped from the beast as more darts fired. The growl turned into a scream as the wolf shifted into his human form.

The scream died abruptly when the man passed out.

Within seconds, a truck pulled up next to the net and we dropped from our respective trees.

Greg was the first person at the net, his gun clutched in his hand.

He pulled the net off as a group of men jumped out of the truck, then loaded the body onto the back. With equal speed, the men got back in and drove off.

"Who shot that first shot?" Greg sounded pissed off.

I kept my mouth shut as I approached my father.

"I'm only asking one more time. Who shot the first shot?"

I could hear my heart stammering in my chest.

"I did," Emily confessed.

Greg whirled to face her.

Stunned, I did too, but she didn't meet my gaze. Why was she doing this?

His lips curved. "That was one hell of a shot. How'd you pull it off?"

"Luck," she muttered. She didn't share his enthusiasm.

Another truck pulled in and my sister hopped off.

Collin opened his door and got out while Greg continued to question Emily.

Collin's eyes found mine and I quickly looked away.

Collin walked over to Greg and Emily, Liz hot on his heels.

"You didn't tell us they were that fast. Close range, in battle, it's a different story, but like that, being chased? The bait will never be able to outrun them. You're putting their lives at risk!" Emily yelled the moment she caught sight of Collin.

"Which is why Collin picked her up with the truck," Greg placated before Collin could say a word.

"You're out of your mind. Someone could've died tonight!"

"No one did," Greg said as he looked at each of us in turn. "We need to find the Alpha. Soon. I hope luck is on your side with the next hunt, Emily," he said as he walked to Collin's truck.

Collin gave Liz a hug and whispered to her. I could tell he was pleased with her.

Liz beamed after him as he walked back to his truck and drove off.

"Emily," a man with a thick Scottish accent said. For the life of me, I couldn't remember his name. "It was a good night."

"Yeah, but someone will die if Lady Luck decides to turn her back on us." She stomped off in the direction of her tent.

Everyone dispersed and I made my way toward Liz and the tents. My sister was still hyped up on adrenaline, regaling the others with what a rush it had been.

I quickened my stride, tears blurring my vision. I crashed into her and wrapped my arms around her neck, squeezing her so tight I was sure I'd cut off her airway.

"Hey, hey. I'm okay. Collin was right there when it started speeding up." She stroked my back. "That was one hell of a shot, Ru," she whispered in my ear.

"You knew it was me?"

"I'm not stupid, Ru. It's simple geometry. From the angle of Emily's tree and where he fell, there was no way she could've made that shot. Why the heck didn't you want to say it was you?"

"Because Emily is right. Pure luck."

Liz pulled out of my grip and shook her head. "You're wrong. You made for this." She brushed a strand of hair behind my ear and squeezed my shoulder before she turned to leave as our father arrived.

"You okay?" he asked her

Liz nodded as she passed him.

I was certain he hadn't heard our conversation, but looked at me with a strange expression.

"Ru, you know if there is anything you want to tell me—"

"Dad, it was just a headache. Last night, with all the worry and stress..." I smiled. "I'm fine, really."

"Okay." He nodded, pulling me under his arm for a side hug.

He brushed a kiss on my head, his lips lingering a moment. "You did great tonight, kiddo. Next time don't be scared to take credit." He walked over to his tent to start breaking it down.

I groaned. "Does everyone know?"

He chuckled at me in answer.

Grumbling, I turned to pack up.

If these hunters were so advanced, why hadn't Greg picked up that Emily had been lying?

I couldn't help but feel that there was something off with this group. They didn't hunt like other hunters, and they had a shocking number of surviving members. Something didn't add up.

Were they all still alive because close combat was minimized, or was it something else?

Only time would tell. The truth always had a way of coming out, and I knew my father was inspecting them with a hawk's eye.

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, Collin visited Liz regularly. Liz was lovely and they made a great couple, but it bothered me that he spent so much time around our house, because there was always an awkward glance between us.

He wasn't going to drop the issue of my visions. I was certain he'd be asking me about my sixth sense again soon, and I was curious to know where he had seen it before. I was afraid his upbringing meant it was a wolf thing. What did the future hold for me if it was?

I was already in bed when the engine of his truck announced Collin's late departure. I could only imagine that my sister was floating on cloud nine right about now.

The next morning in the kitchen, Liz whistled a silly tune until she caught my father's eye.

Her cheeks flushed, but she grinned and rolled her eyes. "What? I like him."

"It's gonna snow. Hell is gonna freeze over," Theo teased.

"Oh, shut up." She laughed as she slapped him with the cloth she was holding.

I helped her with the eggs for breakfast while she prepared a quiche for lunch and popped it in the oven.

Our gazes locked and we shared a smile.

"I need you to be careful, Liz," Dad said.

I knew my father well. Like me, he seemed to be on high alert around Collin or any of Greg's hunters.

"Daddy, Collin wouldn't hurt a fly."

"He grew up with wolves, Lizzy."

"And he found his place back where he belongs," Liz argued with him.

"I know, but I still want you to be cautious. We haven't hunted with this team during full moon yet."

I narrowed my eyes, frowning.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Liz asked with a disbelieving chuckle.

"Be careful." He kissed her forehead.

Her jaw tightened.

I puzzled over what my father said as I sat down for breakfast. What was he insinuating with his full moon comment? What would bother him about hunting with them during the full moon?

I nearly choked on my eggs when it came to me.

Did my father think Collin was a werewolf?

THE POSSIBILITY of what my father was thinking made my head spin off its axis.

I couldn't stop thinking about it, and I was certain the rest of my family couldn't either.

Collin was coming over tonight for dinner and I had a feeling my father would be putting out our finest cutlery—the ones made of pure silver.

Werewolves, even in their human forms, burned when they touched silver.

Theo and I helped set the table, and I chewed on the inside of my cheek as Theo took out the silverware.

Luckily, Liz was too preoccupied thinking about Collin to notice. She'd be pissed if she knew what we were thinking.

My father was under the impression that Collin hadn't merely grown up with werewolves—he thought Collin was one of them.

We'd just finished setting the table when Liz came bouncing downstairs, looking as pretty as ever in her short summer dress and her hair down in loose curls.

I smiled at her.

"You're wearing that?" She eyed my shirt and wrinkled her nose.

"A bit of humor never hurt anyone," I said, looking down at the writing on my shirt. Big bold letters exclaiming, BETTER WATCH OUT FOR THE FULL MOON AS I AIN'T NO PRINCESS looked back at me.

She laughed. "We kill them, Ru, we don't become them."

"It's my way of blending in."

I wanted to see the look on Collin's face when he saw the writing on my shirt.

How would a wolf react to it? Would a wolf find it funny? Or would it incite rage or annoyance? But even Liz was annoyed at my shirt, so anger was more probable. A wolf would try to cover it up, so they'd probably try to laugh it off.

Many people hid the truth behind their smiles.

A few minutes later, Collin's truck pulled up and my sister was a butterfly, fluttering around the furniture to get to her flower.

I laughed at my stupid metaphor.

The flower might be a delicious monster instead.

Dad greeted him with a handshake like always, and I watched the exchange over the top of the book I was reading as I lounged on the sofa.

I loved books, especially ones about normal teenagers with ordinary problems.

I would never be normal. It didn't stop me from wishing I could be one of the girls in the books I read.

"Let's go, missy, your fairytale characters can wait," Theo said from the hallway.

I huffed as I slipped my bookmark into place and went to the kitchen.

"Ru," Collin greeted as I sat down.

His eyes caught my shirt and his brow furrowed. I watch his face carefully, willing his expression to give something away.

"You want to tell me something?" he asked in a serious tone.

Lizzy laughed. "She says it's her way of blending in."

"Blending in with whom?" Collin's lips curved.

"Shut up, both of you," I grumbled.

Liz laughed as she brought the hot dishes from the oven to the middle of the table with all the other food.

She'd slaved over the stove today to make this the best dinner Collin had ever had.

She served my father first, then Theo grabbed his own helping.

Collin was next.

We looked on in anticipation.

My father's shotgun leaned against the wall behind him, within arm's reach.

A smile tugged at the corner of Collin's lips as he noticed the silverware.

"Love the cutlery. I hope you didn't take it out for a normal fellow like me," he said as he touched the pure silver spoon.

My father grinned back.

"Well, you want to date my daughter. I have to make sure she isn't seeing a werewolf."

Liz gasped. "That's what you've been thinking all this time? Daddy!" She giggled, her contagious laughter bringing a feeling of immense relief. But even knowing he wasn't a werewolf, I still had a strange feeling about Collin.

My father's walls lowered a bit, and I saw he didn't think that Collin was a threat. But I still wasn't so sure. Collin knew my secret. Even though I'd denied it, he knew what I was hiding from my family. To me, he was still dangerous.

COLLIN

THE NIGHT PROGRESSED QUICKLY, and enjoyably.

Liz was fantastic, but she wasn't Ru. Getting close to Ru was like trying to get close to a wall surrounded by barbwire. Liz was the complete opposite. She pulled me in so fast I felt like I was drowning.

Ru was quiet. Based on the book beside her, she spent her free time reading.



But she'd shot that wolf at breakneck speed. Not even Tanner could have made that shot. And Ru let Emily take the credit for her. Why?

Young hunters usually wanted to be recognized, but Ru wasn't like that.

Was that what she'd seen in her vision? Where to aim, when to pull the trigger? I needed to know. After all, Ru was the reason we'd decided to hunt with them. Ru could find Heiko, but I had a feeling she hadn't embraced her gift.

Why was she hiding it from her family?

Had something happened in her past? I needed answers, and there was no way I'd get them from Liz. I couldn't very well ask her if someone in her family was having hallucinations. Liz was smart. She would unravel Ru's secret.

I couldn't do that to Ru. We needed her, but I had no idea how to make her trust me. She didn't trust me, and neither did her father.

"Thank you for the dinner. It was the best meal I've had in a long time."

Liz grinned. "My pleasure." She stepped closer to me and touched her lips to mine, quickly deepening the kiss as she slipped her tongue between my lips. I tightened my arm around her, faking the desire she wanted from me. It wasn't that she wasn't a magnificent kisser, because she was, but I didn't reciprocate her feelings. The feelings I thought I had for her grew weaker with every touch.

She was a hunter, and hunters were dangerous. They couldn't see the good in supernatural beings, only the bad.

I pulled away from her and climbed into my truck, winking at her before I drove away.

I blew out a breath. I needed to stop this.

A few miles later, my phone rang.

"And?" Greg's voice boomed through the truck's speakers.

I sighed. "It's as you expected. They don't trust me, and if they don't trust me, I doubt they trust the rest of us."

Greg was silent for a beat before he asked, "Did it work?"

"It did. The silver didn't burn me at all."

"Good, that's good. Did you find anything from the girl?"

"No, she's shut as tight as a vault, but I'll have her combination soon," I joked.

His laughter echoed through my truck.

"Do you think she's had a vision of him?"

"I have no idea, Greg."

"We need to find him. I can't do this much longer, it's not right."

My fingers tightened on the steering wheel. "They won't understand. They live to kill, Greg. They need to believe that we are killing the wolves. If they know the truth, they'll kill us."

"If we lose you..."

I shook my head even though he couldn't see me. "You won't. Did you get anything out of the Omega?"

"No, he isn't budging. He refuses to be enslaved."

"Idiot. It's not what this is."

"The raving madness is all they know, Collin. They don't believe the old tales. I doubt they even know that Heiko exists."

"Still, the madness can't be that enticing."

"Believe me, it isn't," Greg muttered.

"See you in a few."

"We have a bet going on here. What did they try to out you with?"

I laughed. "The cutlery." Groans and cheers rose in the background.

"Well, I'm glad it worked."

"Me too. That shotgun doesn't look like a pleasant way to die."

Greg laughed. "See you soon."

It wasn't easy to deceive the hunters. But we needed to find Heiko. I could only help those that wanted to be helped. But Heiko could help everyone. He could link their minds together and allow me to do what I had been born to do—keep the wolves sane during the full moon.

The truth would eventually come out. The trust would be broken, and so would Liz's heart.

## SIX

RU

COLLIN WAS a constant presence over the next few nights. If he wasn't present, he was on the phone with Liz for hours.

I hoped my father was digging deeper, because I didn't believe that he trusted Collin, no matter how friendly he sounded whenever Collin was around.

But I was reassured that even if my father wasn't suspicious, at least Theo and Will seemed to be. They asked him question after question about his life and the way he grew up. It was interesting to hear.

I never joined in on the conversation—I tried to make myself scarce whenever Collin was around—but I always eavesdropped, trying to glean as much information as possible.

It couldn't be easy for him to give us all their secrets, but he answered every question without hesitation.

What was it with this guy?

No matter how open he was with us, my gut still told me we couldn't trust him or his group.

I hoped I wasn't the only one. But it was so hard to figure out what was going on in their minds. We all had our own way of finding

out the truth.

I couldn't be friendly with someone I didn't trust, although Grandma Marie had always said, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

Was that what Dad and Theo were doing?

I hoped so.

One night while I was eavesdropping, I had another vision.

I clamped my hand over my mouth so I could keep my groans of pain silent, but I wasn't sure if it was working. The headaches were getting more painful every time, and they lasted longer. Even the dizziness was becoming unmanageable.

I prepared myself for another vision of a hunt or battle, but I found myself in the desert instead.

I squinted against the glaring sun. I could barely make out a structure that looked like a pyramid in the distance.

This was Egypt!

For the first time in a vision, I moved unwillingly. Everything flashed passed me, as if I were running at a supernatural speed.

The velocity had my mind and gut tumbling. I didn't like this vision.

I was tired, but I felt everything viscerally —the wind through my hair, the turmoil in my stomach. The dryness in my mind.

I wanted to throw up, could feel my stomach heaving, and as if a switch was flipped, I came to a stop.

I fell on all fours and my body convulsed as I vomited. My head was spinning and I closed my eyes, taking deep breaths to try and control the dizziness.

I hated traveling at this speed. I was glad I wasn't a supernatural being.

When the earth finally stopped turning around me, I looked up and found myself in a forest. There was still sand on my palms and knees.

The trees around me were so peaceful.

Was I still in Egypt? It didn't look like it, but every desert had oases, right?

To my left was a large, dilapidated structure. I had no idea what it once was, but the foundation was big, and a few pillars were still standing.

I pushed myself up onto my feet and brushed the sand off my hands and knees.

I could feel every grain of sand pressing into my palms; the vision seemed impossibly real.

I stepped inside the structure, a heaviness pressing hard on my chest.

It was empty, but something lurked in the shadows. I could feel its presence—that oppressive sensation that made it hard to breathe. I felt my skin crawl.

I knew I should leave, but I had no control over my body as it pushed forward.

The ground collapsed beneath my feet and I tumbled into the darkness below.

Shooting pain hit my body as I coughed. My head hit something hard and I fumbled for it as I clutched my head.

It felt like an old metal jug.

I threw it aside and it clattered against something.

The sunlight that shone through the hole above me wasn't enough to light wherever the hell I was now.

The darkness was nearly tangible, and my eyes refused to adjust.

The sound of a match lighting filled the night somewhere beyond my field of vision.

Suddenly, flames ran along the room, lighting it around me and I gasped.

Mounds of treasure surrounded me in the cavern.

I couldn't take my eyes off it. Everywhere I looked were gold and gleaming objects. Jewels, jugs, chests spilling over with coins and jewelry.

The fire continued along the ground, spreading out at intersections.

Finally, it stopped. Some sort of altar stood across from me, a sarcophagus.

Maybe I was still in Egypt.

I moved closer to the altar at that same breakneck speed from earlier, jolting to a halt right in front of it. My breath came out in pants.

Dust and sand covered the sarcophagus, and I wiped it away. One of the books I had read recently had explained that only elite or royals used sarcophagi, so whoever was entombed inside had been an important figure.

I stared down at it gravely.

My heart thumped fast and loud and my senses were on high alert.

The silence was deafening, uncomfortable.

I could feel every hair on my body standing on end.

Something was wrong.

*Get out, get out, Ru.*

The tomb crashed open and a werewolf leaped out.

My eyes opened and I was back in my house, my breathing coming in gasps. My heart pounded relentlessly, and I willed myself

to calm down.

Was that the Alpha?

Was he hiding in Egypt?

What did it mean?

Why couldn't these visions tell me what it meant?

It felt as if I was losing my mind.

No wonder Grandma Marie didn't fight. I didn't want to fight anymore either. I wanted the visions to stop.

This was no way to live my life.

I took a few deep breaths to calm my frantically beating heart.

Goosebumps pricked on my skin. I rubbed my neck, trying to expel the tingling sensation.

What the hell was wrong with me? Why was I seeing this shit?

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I tried to ignore the heavy feeling in my gut.

I was too young for this shit.

Grandma Marie hadn't seen this at such a young age. Why was I?

WEEKS PASSED while I felt trapped in my own world, obsessed about the turn my visions had taken.

Who was inside that tomb?

It didn't help that I was alone in this. My family would think I was insane, and Greg would want answers I couldn't give him if I told him I thought the Alpha was hiding out in Egypt.

It even sounded outlandish to me.

I hadn't even known werewolves occupied Egypt. They were popular in France—it wasn't uncommon for hunters to get lost in the catacombs because they believed a werewolf resided there.

At least I wasn't having horrible visions about that place.



I got a spine-chilling, creepy feeling whenever hunters spoke about the catacombs.

Obviously, my sister would love to test her skills there. She probably wouldn't even get lost because she had an amazing inner compass.

I had been so consumed in my own worries that I hadn't noticed that my sister was surrounded in a shroud of sadness. I only realized when I found her in the kitchen, crying over a pot of spaghetti on the stove.

Tears streaked down her cheeks and she kept sniffing and wiping her nose with her free hand.

She glanced up as I walked into the kitchen, but she quickly looked down at the pot and continued stirring.

"You okay?" I asked.

She huffed. "Don't, Ru. I don't have time for this."

I played with the hem of my shirt as I puzzled over her words. "Time for what?"

She looked back at me, slamming the spoon on the edge of the pot, then throwing it down on the counter.

"What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me? Ru!" Her voice had that high-pitched tone it took on whenever she was upset. "What's wrong with you? You know what Collin told me! Everyone knows what he told me."

Oh shit, what had happened? Had Collin told them about me?

She glared at me. "And what the hell is going on with you? You are freaking me out. And it's not just me. We're all freaked out. Dad is so damn worried about you, but you act like everything is all fine and dandy. I know something is going on, because you're my sister and I know you."

"I'm sorry," I muttered, turning to leave, but she grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the doorway, stepping around me to block my path.

"No, you are not leaving until you tell me what is going on with you."

"Liz, get out of my way, please."

"No! We used to tell each other everything, Ru. You've been walking around like a damn ghost for weeks, and I've had it with you not telling me. What is so hard that you can't talk to me about it?" Her voice cracked, her lips quivering with pent-up emotion.

"Nothing! There's nothing going on with me!"

"I don't buy it!"

"Girls." Dad's voice came from the doorway. "What is going on here?"

"Ru is hiding something. I want to know what is so hard in her pathetic little life that she cannot share with us."

I gaped at my sister. She'd never spoken to anyone like that before. The bitterness in her voice was shocking.

"Elizabeth, enough!"

"But, Dad—"

"I said enough! Go to your room."

"You can't order me around. I'm twenty-one years old, for crying out loud."

My father rubbed a hand over his face and sighed. "Then act your damn age. So the boy didn't feel the same way. It happens, Liz, but that doesn't give you the right to talk to your sister like that. When the time is right, Ru will tell us what has been bothering her. I know she will. And you need to trust that she will confide in you."

Liz shook her head, her face still red with anger and tears. "Fine, whatever," she hissed and stomped off.

I turned to my father, incredulous. "Liz blew up at me like that because Collin doesn't like her? That's the reason for her little temper tantrum?"

From the look on his face, I could see he wasn't exactly pleased with me either. "I'm with your sister on this, Ru. You haven't been yourself lately. Can't you tell me what's going on?"

"Dad, I'm—"

"Don't you dare say you're okay. Because I can see that you're not. I don't like the headaches you've been getting."

My gaze snapped toward him.

"Are you sick, sweetheart? If you are, we need to get you to a doctor." His face was filled with concern.

"No," I said, a bit too fast, but I couldn't let my father take me to a doctor. There would be tests and scans, and I didn't know what would show up on an MRI. Was my brain built differently?

"Are you sure?"

"I'm fine, Dad. I'm not sick. We have other things to worry about."

"You are my daughter, Ru. You are my life. You, Theo, Liz. If anything happened to you, I could never forgive myself. Sickness doesn't choose. You know that. Let me take you to the doctor to make sure."

"Dad, please." Tears fell from my eyes. "I'm not sick, okay? Something is wrong, but it's not that. Give me time. I will tell you, I promise."

Confusion and worry warred on my father's face. I couldn't blame him; I was confused and worried myself.

He walked over to me and put his arm around me. "Fine, but if this gets worse, I'm stepping in. I'm the parent, I don't care how old you are, you hear?"

I nodded against his chest.

"I love you, peanut. You know that."

I nodded.

"You know you can tell me anything."

"I know. I need to make sense of it first."

"Okay." He kissed my head then let me go.

I walked to my room, my mind racing. This secret of mine was tearing my family apart, but if I told them, they'd never believe that I was sane.

As I passed Liz's door, I could hear her muffled sobs.

How could Collin not feel the same way about Liz? Liz was the embodiment of perfection. She was smart and brave and gorgeous. And she was one of the best people I knew.

She didn't deserve this heartache but my father was right. You couldn't make someone like you. That was the way life worked.

COLLIN

ON THE FULL MOON, shifters took our place. It was the same ones that had taken our place that day to prove to the SHA that we weren't werewolves or vampires or witches or djinns. Luckily, they had no clue about shifters.

Shifters were as close to humans as a supernatural creature could be. They could only shift into another human. Nothing in their anatomy differed from that of humans, so the SHA system didn't recognize them as supernatural. They could touch silver without getting burned, they could walk in sunlight without shriveling up in pain.

They were the best cover a wolf could get.

On the night of the full moon, we hid out in a nearby caves. I had to be close enough to hear the conversation between the hunters and the shifters.

Liz was being difficult tonight. I felt sorry for Steve, the shifter who had taken my place, but he was handling it well.

She was fighting. She wouldn't give up.

But I wasn't worried about Liz. I was worried about Ru. She wasn't coping with her gift. She was disappearing further into a deep hole, and I needed to be ready to pull her out of it.

Of course, telling Liz that what had been between us was over, that I didn't feel the same way, was shooting myself in the foot. Now I didn't have access to the farm. But I couldn't lead Liz on forever. It wasn't right. She was a nice girl, sweet, but she wasn't meant for me.

Steve kept quiet, kept his distance, and begged Liz nicely to let this go.

He was a good guy and had even asked me why I dumped her. What was wrong with me for letting her go? I'd told him it was a wolf thing, which wasn't far off.

The hunt was unsuccessful. There were no casualties, but they also hadn't managed to catch a werewolf.

Nevertheless, we prepared ourselves for the next hunt as soon as the shifters left, apologizing profusely for the mishap with the hunt. They'd be back the next full moon to cover for us. The shifters weren't great hunters, but they were great at hiding it.

John, the shifter who had stood in for Greg, blamed the failure on an equipment malfunction. Huck had been all over him, because Liz had barely escaped with her life.

She was fine, though—not even a scratch on her.

Ru, like always, had been so damn quiet.

Tonight, I'd try to get through to her. She needed to unburden herself. I needed to know what her visions revealed and what her sight was linked to.

We met them at our next destination, nearby a pack.

This wasn't normal entrapment. This pack was sadistic and evil. Three of our pack members weren't here tonight. They had gone to meet with this pack, to tell them how I would be able to help them, and our members had barely come back alive.

They were still healing.

This pack wouldn't think twice about killing other packs. They seemed to relish it.

They spent every night in their wolf forms and didn't even care who saw them.

Greg and I didn't like it, but there was nothing we could do. We had no idea where Heiko was hiding out, and he'd been asleep for the past two thousand years.

Heiko wouldn't like what was going on with the packs. I'd heard the legendary stories about him from Greg, who was one of the ancients, one of the original pack members.

And it wasn't easy tracking other wolves down.

All the wolves were my responsibility until we found Heiko.

Tricking the hunters to get close to Ru so she could find him was the only way to save the wolves. It was wrong, but I had no other choice.

Ru had the gift.

Sure, all the women of our pack had the gift, but it was only focused on one thing.

The young ones, when their gift made its appearance, saw bits and pieces until their foresight stabilized after about a year.

Ru was still young, so I was sure she was still seeing fragments.

I leaned against the truck with my arms resting on the hood and drummed my fingers on the rigid steel. Huck wasn't here yet and I was beginning to worry; he wouldn't join the hunt if he thought his daughters were in danger.

"Please tell me that tonight—"

"Emily, you need to calm down," Greg said. "Last time, the equipment failed and I'm sorry about that, but we've checked it a hundred times for tomorrow night. It won't be entrapment, though." He set his bag on the tailgate.

"Excuse me?" Emily said, baffled.

"We chose this area for a reason," I said. "There's a pack nearby. They are extremely dangerous. We couldn't go after them during the full moon, but we can tomorrow when they're not as strong."

"We're hunting again?" Ronny grinned.

"Just this hunt. In the past week, they've been killing in this area. They're always on the move. They stay in one place for two weeks then move on. We've been trying to track them down for six months." The lie slipped easily off Greg's tongue. "We finally found them. They won't hesitate to take any of us down. So don't give them a chance."

"How many are in the pack?" Emily asked.

"About five. Three men, including the Alpha, and two women."

"About? You're not sure? You're sending us to our death and you don't know the exact number?" Emily snapped.

"I'm ninety-nine percent sure," I interrupted before Greg could respond.

"And we're supposed to take your word?" Liz's voice came from behind me.

I whirled.

Huck had arrived.

"Elizabeth," Huck reprimanded.

"I'll play nice," Liz muttered, throwing her hands up in surrender.

It bothered me that I was responsible for her bitterness, but I needed to break things off with her.

"Why are we trapping an entire pack? We can hardly trap two at a time," Huck said.

My eyes drifted to Ru, but it was like she wasn't even here.

"We aren't trapping this time. We need to kill. This is a vicious pack that lives for the kill," Greg said.

"How many?"

I turned my gaze back to Huck. "We're ninety-nine percent sure that there's only five in the pack."

"You're not sure?" Huck asked.

"One percent not sure."

He nodded. "Do you have eyes on them?"

"We have a few scouts, but they can't get closer. The pack will know."

"Let me guess, they're using Stra-vain."

"Every night, except when they are breaking away."

"So, they will kill tonight."

"Most likely."

"Then why not go after them tonight?" Huck demanded.

"Because it's two days after the full moon," I said. "Do you have any idea how strong they are after a full moon? The shift will happen tomorrow, and they will lose most of their energy. If we hunt them tonight, it'll be suicide. We won't stand a chance."

Huck pursed his lips but didn't say a word.

I grabbed my tent and backpack from the bed of the truck and left to set it up.



Everyone else followed suit, settling in and trying to get as comfortable as possible.

Two groups still hadn't joined us, and I hoped they were just late, but I had a sinking feeling that they had decided to abandon us.

I could feel Liz's eyes on me. She was having trouble dealing with my rejection.

I hadn't meant to break her heart, but it was for the best.

Ru was my next problem. We needed to get her on our side. And soon.

But I didn't want to think about that now.

We roasted a couple of hogs some of the hunters caught, and everyone sat down to eat, talking loudly with their mouths full of food.

Suddenly, Ru clutched her head in her hands and Huck rushed her to her tent.

"Ru, I think it's time to take you to the doctor," he muttered as they walked past me.

"Uh-mmm," she mumbled in agreement.

Greg caught my gaze with a raised eyebrow. I chewed on the inside of my cheek.

Liz was watching Ru's tent with concern.

Huck came back and sat down with a heavy sigh. Everyone was silent.

"Is she okay?" Emily asked.

"I don't know. These headaches have become more frequent. It's bringing her down. She's like a ghost."

"I'm so sorry, Huck," Emily said as she stroked his back. "What do you think is causing it?"

"No idea. She told me she isn't sick, but I think she's lying. Doesn't want me to worry."

Emily smiled. "But she must realize that we will never stop worrying about our kids."

I kept a close eye on Ru's tent while we ate, waiting for her to come out of her vision. I hoped she would want to walk away from camp, like she had the last time she'd had a vision while the hunters were gathered.

I was surprised at her control. She'd barely made a sound. How many visions had she experienced to be able to control her body like that?

From the corner of my eye, I saw her sneaking out of her tent while everyone was still focused on their food. Furtively, I glanced around; the others seemed to be oblivious.

I needed to know what she'd seen.

I got up and put my plate in the small container that would be used as a basin and grinned at one of the women from my pack who was already starting to clean up.

I walked in the direction Ru had gone, having already picked up her scent. With my enhanced senses, I could hear her heart racing and her heavy breathing.

Her response to this vision was much worse than the previous one.

I found her sitting behind a tree, hugging her legs to her chest, eyes clenched tightly shut.

I stopped in front of her and cleared my throat. "What did you see?"

"Shut up," she groaned.

"Ru, what did you see? Please. We need to know."

"Would you sod off?" she hissed.

"Sod off?" I asked with a chuckle.

"Go. Away," she snapped.

I softened my voice. "The headaches can't be easy to deal with."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

I sat on my haunches in front of her. "You're still playing that game? Why haven't you told your father? The man is worried sick."

She scowled at me. "How do you suppose I do that? They shoved my grandmother into a fucking asylum because of this shit."

So she was afraid they'd lock her up. Hunters were so ignorant sometimes. They had no problem believing in werewolves and vampires and everything else they hunted but drew a harsh line at visions.

"Okay, so telling them is out of the question."

Her face fell as she blinked at me. "What?"

"You said they thought your grandmother was crazy."

She heaved a sigh. "They did. But I think I'm crazy."

"You're no such thing, Ru. You have a gift. It's extremely rare, but not unheard of. Plenty of humans glimpse the future."

"It's so simple for you to accept this?"

I smiled. "You'd be surprised how open-minded I am."

I sat next to her, staring past the trees. The forest was quiet tonight; the animals sensed that we were here. I missed the sounds of the animals rustling through the trees.

"Why did you break up with my sister?" she asked.

I turned my head to her. "She's too perfect for me."

She snorted. "Bullshit."

"You don't agree?"

"Liz has her flaws."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? Name them."

Ru fell quiet, frowning in concentration.

"Just as I thought," I said with a grin after giving her a moment. She sighed. "You won't find anyone better than her."

"I know that, but Liz and I are not meant to be, Ru."

"Bull—"

"Stop saying bullshit. I learned about it from the wolves. They call it the lockpass."

"The what?"

I grinned at her, then looked away. "The lockpass. The men go through it when they find their true mate. It's magnificently beautiful, but also completely messed up."

"What is it?"

"It's a sign, a process. You go through it, and when it's all over, there isn't anyone but your true mate. Wolves only have one true mate. There cannot be another. You don't know what love is until you experience the love of a wolf."

I could feel her eyes on me, and knew if I looked at her now, she'd either look bewildered or judgmental. "You are not a wolf."

"It doesn't matter. You need to feel that kind of love, and it doesn't matter what or who you are, you'll feel it when it happened."

I'd been trying so hard to hide that fact from her, but when she was near me like this, I knew what she was.

"Well, it sounds nuts." She looked away.

"As nuts as seeing things that haven't happened yet?"

She huffed and shook her head, and I had to bite on the inside of my cheek so I didn't laugh at her. I was annoying her. Greg had told me that would happen. "What did you see? Was it about tomorrow?"

She stiffened.

"It is, isn't it? How far am I off?"

"The pack has nine members," she mumbled.

"Nine?" My eyes widened.

She closed her eyes. Her face hardened, pulling into a grimace at the memory. Whatever she had seen must not have been pleasant.

"I saw the death of every single person in this group, Collin. This hunt is a suicide mission."

"It won't be if we prepare, Ru. How many times have you seen your family die in your visions?"

"Nine times, ten, twelve, I can't even remember anymore."

"But every time you've managed to change their fate. Talk me through everything that happened in your vision."

She inhaled slowly and deeply, then exhaled even slower.

I could hear her heart rate calming down instantly. The level of control she had over her body amazed me. I waited for her to start, but she didn't.

"Who dies first, Ru?"

She closed her eyes for a few seconds before opening them and turning her head slowly to look at me.

Her eyes were dark and fathomless. It baffled me that she hid herself, that she had no idea how gorgeous she was.

The silence between us was suffocating. With her sister, I couldn't wait for her to stop talking so we could sit in silence for a while. With Ru, I wanted the opposite.

"You."

## SEVEN

RU

IT WAS a relief to tell Collin everything I had seen in my vision, and he listened attentively, taking it all in and asking me questions. It wasn't all that awesome to describe his death and the way it affected the entire group, but he had asked me not to leave anything out. It had been heart-wrenching to see Greg almost losing his mind in my vision; he seemed to love Collin like a son.

When I was done, I could see that Collin believed me. Not only did he believe me, but he took action, springing to his feet when he was certain I was okay.

He disappeared into Greg's tent, and I was worried that he would tell Greg about my visions. What if Greg told the entire hunting brigade? I hoped he wouldn't reveal my secret to change the plan.

But either way, even if Greg only shared the new intel with the hunting party, I was certain my family would surmise the truth and ship me off to the same place as Grandma Marie.

I went back to my tent and collapsed on my bedroll, but sleep wouldn't come. I would be exhausted tomorrow, but at least I knew I would be free from visions—they'd never happened back to back.

Greg had been right about the pack being sadistic. They took pleasure in killing; they loved it and lived for it. I saw the thrill they took from the kill whenever they tore into someone I knew and loved.

In my vision, Collin's death hadn't been fast. It was as if the wolves knew who he was, that he had grown up with a pack and was now spilling secrets to the enemy.

I smiled when I remembered the secret he shared with me—the lock thing that happened when they met their true mate.

It made them sound like people, not the monsters I had grown up with.

A part of me was ecstatic that I had been able to tell someone about my vision, and the fact that Collin believed me was an immense relief.

But whenever I closed my eyes, I heard my family screaming, saw flashes of them fighting, trying to stay alive through the carnage.

As always, fear pinned me in place and I did nothing.

My heart still raced and I struggled to calm myself. My nerves were like sparks of electricity flowing through me.

Finally, I managed to relax and drift away. To my surprise, I dreamed of nothing—not the screaming, not the pain, just darkness and a vivid, happy memory.

Grandma Marie was in my dream. She had been such a big part of my life, and I missed her dearly. Perhaps if she was still here, she would have told me about her visions when I started to get them. Perhaps she would have acted differently then.

Maybe it would've been easier on her if she had someone to share her visions with.

I woke up well before sunrise and found my father sitting in front of the fire with a cup of joe in his hands, deep in thought.

I sat down next to him on the log, snapping him out of his trance. He pulled me close and brushed his lips over my cheek.

"Morning, Daddy."

"Morning, peanut. How do you feel?"

"Better," I answered with a sheepish grin. "I'm a bit tired."

He nodded. "When we get back, I want you to see Dr. Rudolf."

I sighed. "Dad—"

"No, Ru. We need to find out why you are getting these headaches. You can't deny that they're becoming worse and more frequent."

I nodded reluctantly.

"So, Dr. Rudolf it is. Even if it's just to ease your old man's worries."

"There's nothing to worry about, Dad. Promise." I squeezed his hand in reassurance.

"You are my life, Ru. I don't know what I would do if anything happened to any you. And with these hunters, anything can happen."

"Liz will be okay, Dad. Even if she and Collin aren't together anymore, he will still protect her."

"I know. He's an okay guy."

I chuckled. Collin was more than an okay guy.

"Dad, do think it's true what he said yesterday about the wolves' strength waning on the third day?"

My dad took a sip of his coffee before answering me. "Collin sure seems to know a lot about them."

"It's like sharing family secrets. It can't be easy." In a way, I felt sorry for Collin. It had to feel like he was betraying his own kind,



even if he wasn't a wolf.

"Yeah." My father slung his arm around me and squeezed. As if the gesture were punctuation, our conversation fizzled. He and I could sit together in silence for hours without getting awkward.

Liz was the complete opposite. She loved to talk. She was well versed in different topics, which made her easy to talk to.

I was still a bit upset with her. I understand that her heart was broken, but it was so unlike her to say something so hurtful to me.

I sighed.

I shouldn't be hard on her. I had no idea what it felt like to have your heart broken by someone like Collin.

But still, to assume that I had nothing to worry about... She didn't have to deal with seeing the deaths of the people she loved countless times, didn't have to deal with the devastation.

People didn't have the right to judge other people just by what they saw.

The rest of the camp stirred with wakefulness. The silence my father and I were enjoying was interrupted when Liz plopped her grumpy ass down next to me.

She still wasn't herself. Heartbreak didn't suit her.

She kept glancing over at Collin's tent, her face a mixture of sadness and anger.

I wished she could get over him. So what if he didn't feel the same way? It couldn't be easy, but I couldn't stand her bitchiness anymore.

She didn't need Collin in her life. Liz was better than him, and soon another guy would come along and sweep her off her feet.

I chuckled to myself. Collin had said Liz was too perfect for him, but how on earth was that a negative?

The day dragged. I hated it. The seconds felt like minutes and the minutes felt like hours.

I felt like I had aged ten years when Greg finally called us together.

I clutched at my father's arm, nervous energy coursing through me as I waited for Greg to drop the bomb. I don't know what I would do if he announced I could see the future.

But he didn't mention my visions; he stuck to the new pack numbers, which no one seemed to take lightly.

Everyone voiced concerns, but Greg's group was well prepared. Greg had overhauled the entire plan according to my vision, and he explained where the pack would strike, and how they would kill.

My eyes briefly caught Collin's, and the look on his face shocked me. After he had been so understanding last night, I hadn't expected him to look at me as if I had a disease.

I told myself to shake it off. Who cared what he thought?

After the meeting, we geared up, ready for the hunt.

My father handed me my red vest and I shrugged it on as he collected our family for his stupid pep talk. They always sounded more like goodbye than anything else.

"Liz, Ru," he said but he looked at all of us in turn. "I know we haven't hunted in a while, but you have to be on high alert tonight. Listen to your senses, stay close to one another, and whatever happens tonight, know that I love you with my entire heart."

I didn't like it when he talked like this.

"Dad," Liz whined.

"No, Liz. You heard what Greg and Collin said about this pack. They are sadistic. They will stop at nothing. With the knowledge they were springing on us, I had to admit, I wanted to leave. But what sort of hunter would I be if I ran away? These people need all

the help they can get to take down this pack. We could have easily run into this pack on our own, without Greg and Collin's intel and technology. So that's why we need to stay and help. Liz." He pulled her in his embrace. "Stay close to Ru. If she gets another headache tonight, I need to know that you are there."

She nodded and my father placed his hand behind my neck. Tears glistened in his eyes and my heart clenched.

"Ru, if you feel a headache coming on, get as high into a tree as you can. That's all I've been able to come up with, sweetheart."

I nodded as he let me and Liz out of his embrace.

"Theo, keep your eyes sharp and aim true." He touched Theo's cheek. "Will, take care of your cousin, and Theo, you do the same. Fernus—"

"Stop this shit, Huck. I've been next to you from the moment we started hunting these fuckers. I won't leave now. We get out of this alive, or we don't. I'm not saying goodbye." Uncle Fernus stormed off.

"That's our Fernus. Take care of each other. I'll see you afterward."

We were quiet as Dad pulled us in for a group hug.

Flashes of last night's vision flipped through my mind. That couldn't happen tonight. I would never survive the loss of my family. That much I knew.

I WAS RUNNING.

The rattling from the werewolves echoed through the night, surrounding me. You'd think you would get used to it, but it was a sound that struck terror into the hearts of anyone who heard it. Collin was right. Their speed wasn't the speed of the wolf we had caught on our first hunt with them.

I ran up the tree and pushed off it, doing a backflip over the wolf so I landed right behind the wolf.

I ran forward and slid underneath it, stabbing my dagger into the monster's vulnerable abdomen.

It yelped and growled and my grip faltered, the blade sliding against the thick, shielded part of its body.

As the wolf fell flat on the ground, I unsheathed my sword. I slashed at it, but a part of me hesitated to kill it, even though it wouldn't think twice about killing me.

It snapped its teeth as it advanced toward me, fighting to stay alive. From behind, Liz delivered the final blow and the wolf fell, changing back to its human form with its last breath.

Liz pulled me to my feet, and then she was gone, on to the next wolf, helping wherever she could.

I looked to where the wolf had fallen, and a tiny, seemingly fragile woman lay in its place. She was dirty and naked, her innards spread around her.

"Ru get your ass moving!" my sister yelled.

Without warning, blinding pain seared into my skull. My head felt like it was going to explode.

*Not now, not now.*

I tried with all my might to stay in the present, but the pull of the vision was irresistible.

Fighting raged around me, wolves growling and rattling, combatants screaming. Then the vision flashed me to the tomb.

I pushed against my mind, forcing myself back to reality as I stumbled forward. It continued like that, the headache pounding against my skull as I flashed back into the vision.

As I resisted, more yells and screams filled my ears. But I realized the screams were my own.

I was making myself an easy target.

The deranged sound of my name being shouted echoed through the night air, but it wasn't my father or brother screaming.

The vision wrenched me back to the path toward the tomb at breakneck speed.

Abruptly, I was back in the hunt. More growling, rattling, slashing, screaming my name. Back to the vision.

The whiplash in my mind was making me dizzy and queasy and the ache in my head unbearable. Tonight was the night for me to die.

COLLIN.

TWO SHE-WOLVES WERE GOING berserk because they could smell what we were. Luckily, they couldn't speak English in their wolf forms because they had refused my gift. They loved the kill too much.

"Ru!" Liz screamed.

My head snapped in Liz's direction and I saw her struggling with a wolf. Huck turned and ran the second Liz screamed Ru's name. My eyes tracked him until I found her, her bright red gilet a shining beacon.

My insides froze when I realized what was happening.

She was trying to fight off a vision.

The wolves knew what she was, and they were all aiming for her.

Shots from afar narrowly missed one of the wolves and it saw its chance to advance on Ru.

Huck was busy fighting off the wolf closest to Ru, begging with her to snap out of it, as the other wolf moved swiftly toward her.

"Collin, go!" Greg yelled.

"Tommy," I called and he ran over to help Greg deal with the two she-wolves.

The wolf blurred through the crowd toward Ru. I ran faster, yelling Ru's name desperately.

She shouldn't be fighting the vision. It could kill her.

I collided with the wolf, his scent proclaiming he was the Alpha of the pack.

"Let me be, traitor. She is wolf and you know it," the wolf growled at me in Mahur.

"Not this one."

I grabbed my dagger and stabbed it between its scales and horns. The place right behind its belly, a vulnerable spot

"You will burn for this," he growled.

"You should've accepted the offer," I hissed

He snarled, baring his teeth as he tried to tear into my flesh. I tried to evade him, but he was too quick for me and pinned me on the ground, his paws pressing so hard that I felt my ribs fissuring. I groaned before a scream of pain left my mouth.

Ru's war scream erupted, and she drove a sword through the wolf's back before he could react.

He went limp and collapsed on top of me.

"Collin," Ru whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry, Ru. You can't control it," I said, breathing heavily.

"Did he bite you?"

With the Alpha dead, the others would be turning back to human. I needed to get to them before they outed me and my pack.

But then I realized there were no others left. The fallen were strewn over the hunting area, all in human forms.

I grunted. Some of the fallen were members of our pack.

"Collin." Greg's voice was growing agitated.

I needed to get up and show him I was alive, but with the wolf on top of me, it was a bit difficult.

"I'm sorry," Ru repeated, her voice shaky, her eyes shining with tears.

"Stop apologizing, Ru."

The wolf on top of me finally morphed into its human form. He was big and bald.

Greg shoved him off as he reached me.

"Tommy, get the truck. We need to get Collin to the hospital, now!" Greg ordered.

I would heal fast, but Greg was right. I needed to blend in. I groaned inwardly. This was going to be so boring.

Ru continued apologizing while Greg and Tommy gingerly lifted me and brought me to the truck.

"Collin!" Liz screamed in devastation.

"Dammit, Ru," Theo yelled. "What the hell was that? Why didn't you move?"

Within seconds, the entire group was arguing amongst themselves.

Another agonizing scream tore from my throat.

"It'll be okay, Collin," Greg said.

What was this?

Fiery pain flowed through my arteries, setting my blood on fire. I was on the brink of melting, exploding, burning to a cinder. I wanted to grab my head, but the pain was too overwhelming to lift my arms.

"Doctor, now!" Greg yelled and I could feel the rumble to life and drive off. "Dammit, Collin, it can't be that bad, man."

"It's not that, Greg. It's Ru," I managed to grunt out.

"You didn't kiss her, did you?"

"No, but I fucking saved her life. That counts as act, too, doesn't it?"

"Shit." He sighed. "Well, there's no turning back now, Collin. The pain will be over soon."

It felt like I was being crushed by some invisible force, shattering each individual bone. I cried out, my throat raw a continuous stream of yells wrenched through me.

What was this lockpass doing? This couldn't be normal.

The only thing I knew was that when I woke up from this, I wouldn't be just Collin Freeman anymore.

Ru would be a part of me.



## EIGHT

RU

WE WAITED at the hospital for news on Collin.

My father leaned against the wall, talking to Uncle Fernus in a low voice.

Theo was mad as hell. He'd seen everything through his rifle's scope, but he had been out of range. He had thought he was going to watch me die.

Liz had also gone off on me, screaming like a banshee, but now she was quiet, her worry over Collin trumping everything else.

I'd seen his death. Now he was still fated to die—just in a different way.

I was in shock. I kept feeling like a bystander, not a participant. I'd never had visions so close together, one right after another.

Something was gravely wrong, and I didn't blame my father for worrying. I'd been close to death last night. Now Collin was in the hospital because of me.

I could feel my sister's glare boring into me as I gazed down at my feet. If anything happened to Collin, if he died, she would hate me.

I couldn't blame her. He was here because he saved me.

I'd heard his bones cracking as the wolf pinned Collin. His lungs could have easily been punctured, not to mention that he was probably bleeding internally.

No human could survive injuries so extensive.

I now realized that it had been his voice I had heard while I fought my vision, I couldn't understand why he'd sounded so deranged.

I didn't like it.

I hunched over and rested my head on my arms, the silence tense in the waiting area.

Finally, the doctor came in walked straight to Greg.

My head popped up so I could listen to what they said.

"We're doing everything we can. We're only about halfway through the surgery. If everything goes according to plan, he will need time to recuperate."

Greg nodded.

"Stay strong, and I'll be back to update you soon."

Greg nodded stiffly, his eyes trained on the ground. He crossed his arms over his chest, his shoulders hunched.

He was probably equally as livid as my family was with me. I was the one responsible for all of this, but I hadn't been able to find a tree. The pain from the headache had been crippling; I'd barely been able to see anything except the flashes of the vision.

I wanted to cry, to curl into a ball and disappear.

This was wrong. He should have left me.

"You okay?" a member of Collin's team asked me.

I shook my head, unable to use my voice.

"Don't worry about it, Collin is tougher than you think."

"I know what I heard. It sounded like every bone got crushed. And I don't even want to know what happened to his organs."

There's no way he'll be okay after that."

"He's in great hands. Take it easy."

"It's my fault." My voice cracked.

"No, it's not. Stop thinking like that."

He got up and went over to Greg.

They spoke softly, concern etched on their faces. The women were also worried, and the one who I thought was his cousin kept sending glares my way.

I deserved it. I'd almost gotten him killed.

Her mother, who I assume was Greg's sister, stroked the woman's back and whispered into her ear.

The woman shook her head. "I don't care," she hissed and hurried out of the waiting area.

"Lee!" the older woman called after her, but Lee didn't even turn around. Greg went to his sister's side.

The nagging feeling returned that told me there was something strange about these hunters.

"Huck," Greg called and my father walked over to him.

"Greg, I can't thank you enough. I don't know what I'll do if that boy doesn't make it. If he hadn't—"

"Don't think like that."

"He saved my daughter's life."

Greg smiled. "That's our Collin. The boy might be a bit messed up, but he has a heart of gold."

Liz burst out bawling and Theo pulled her into his side, hugging her tightly and rubbing her arm to calm her down.

My father didn't acknowledge her.

"Huck, take your family home. You don't need to be here."

"Greg," my father protested.

"I'll call you when all this is over. I promise."

After a few moments of silence, my father nodded.

He crouched in front of me. "I'm taking you to the doctor tomorrow, Ru. This has gotten dangerous now."

I nodded and he stood up.

"Come on, let's go."

"Are you sure, Dad?"

"It's a time for family, and we're not Collin's family. Lee is upset, so it's best that we leave."

I got up with a sigh.

"I'm not going anywhere," Liz mumbled stubbornly.

"Liz."

"No, Dad. I'm staying."

"It's not your place anymore. You need to get over this. Now move." My father's voice was stern.

Liz scoffed and stormed to the exit.

I couldn't even look at Greg or any of the other members as I followed.

THE DRIVE to the farm was silent. Liz drove with Will and Uncle Fernus, and Theo and I were with Dad.

The minute we parked, I jumped out of the truck and rushed through the door. An arm grabbed me roughly as I entered the house, spinning me around.

My sister sneered down at me.

"What the hell happened tonight, Ru? What was going on? Don't tell me it's nothing!"

"Liz—"

"Dad, stay out of this. Collin almost died tonight. He still could, Ru. I will never forgive you if he dies. What is going on with you?"

Tell me the truth.” She was hysterical, her fingers digging into my shoulders so hard it was almost painful.

I was her fucking sister, but she only cared about him. Not me. “What do you want me to say, huh, Liz?” I shoved her off. She didn’t see it coming.

“Stop!” My father tried to step between us, but I shoved Liz back another step.

“Do you want me to tell you that I’m as crazy as Grandma Marie?” The words slipped from my mouth without a thought.

My sister froze, and my father slowly lowered his hands down to his sides. Will, Theo, and Uncle Fernus all turned to stare at me.

I laughed like a maniac. “Not what you expected, was it? I see things! I’ve seen things nobody would be able to deal with. I’ve seen you dying over and over, Liz. Do you know what that does to me? No, you only care about fucking Collin! I’m your sister!” I yelled. “Go ahead, Dad. Call the people in white coats. Have me committed. I know you want to.” I turned and ran upstairs.

“Ru,” my father called, but I ignored him, slamming my bedroom door so hard, the window rattled.

I could hear the murmuring of their voices from below, and I burrowed my head into my pillow.

Despite everything, a weight seemed to lift from my shoulders. My family finally knew what was going on with me.

Whatever happens, happens.

I was about to drift off to sleep when I heard a knock on my door. Before I could respond, my door opened and my father stepped into my room.

He sighed and sat at my desk. He didn’t speak. He sat unmoving, the creases on his face deepening with every tense second.

"I'm not sick, Dad. At least, not like you think. Grandma Marie wasn't crazy! Everything she saw was real."

I didn't know why I was trying to get through to him.

His eyes shifted to mine. "I know."

My jaw dropped. "But you—"

"Because she begged me, Ru. She couldn't cope with the things she saw. She begged me to take her to a place where they would stop."

"Dad," I gasped.

"What did you want me to do? Watch her suffer every day? She wasn't my mother, but I did love her."

"You... you don't think I'm crazy?"

"I know it's not normal, sweetheart, but no, I don't. What happened tonight?"

"I was seeing things, and I was trying to fight against it. But it kept forcing me back in. I think I have to let it happen." Tears filled my eyes.

I buried my face in my hands. Dad walked over and wrapped me in his big, strong arms.

"Ru, it's okay," he murmured against my hair.

"What if he dies, Dad?"

"Something tells me Collin is stronger than he seems."

"That wolf crushed him." I shook my head. "It's all my fault."

"Greg doesn't blame you, sweetheart."

"He should. I shouldn't have been there."

"Hush." My father stroked my back, his lips planted firmly on my head. "Have you really been seeing our hunts?"

I nodded tightly. "Every single time, we died. It scared me, Dad. I tried to prepare us as best as I could, but I was terrified you'd realize what was going on and send me to the asylum."

My father chuckled.

I looked up at him with knitted eyebrows.

"I know it's no laughing matter, but at least now some things make sense."

"What do you mean?"

"My gun was always right next me, when I was sure I hadn't put it there. We never picked up on you arranging things like that. There were times that I thought I was losing my mind." He cupped my face. "These visions are not a curse, peanut. You've saved our lives countless times. Thank you." He tightened his arms around me, and tears of relief rushed over my cheeks. "Do you only see hunts?"

I nodded, swallowing the truth. The smoke hadn't even cleared from the bomb I'd dropped. I wasn't ready to tell my father about everything else.

"You saw this hunt, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"So, I'm guessing we have you to thank for the updated intel Greg gave us?"

My head went up and down as if on a hinge. "We all died. Every single person. I had to warn them. No wonder Grandma Marie hadn't coped with it. I don't want to see it anymore."

"Grandma Marie didn't see what you did. She saw things about a war, things that made no sense to her."

I swallowed. I knew that war.

"You are dealing with this much better than she ever did. Your gift has been keeping us safe. I will never have you committed, not unless you asked me to. I love you, Ru." He looked down at me warmly. I was pissed at myself for ever thinking my father would lock me up. "Have you told anyone? You must have told Greg."

I shook my head. "Collin. He's known since our first hunt together. Apparently, he's seen it before. And he sought me out, not the other way around."

"What did he say?"

"He told me that it's not as uncommon as I thought it was. It is rare, but there are people who see things. It's just... most of them end up where Grandma Marie did."

My father nodded, his eyes glazing over as he mulled everything over.

"I'm so sorry, Dad."

"Don't apologize."

"Liz..."

"Your sister will grow used to it. You sprang something big on us tonight."

"I know, but she made me so angry. She's been so bitchy since Collin ended it."

"Yeah, she isn't dealing with it well. I guess that's her one flaw."

I chuckled involuntarily. With a shake of my head, I wiped the tears off my cheeks.

"She'll be okay, Ru. She loves you, and she'll come around soon. But we need to be careful with this."

I pursed my lips, picking at my thumbnail as I waited for him to continue.

"Others will see you as an asset, especially a group like Greg's. And that could be dangerous. I still have a feeling they're hiding something from us... I can't pinpoint exactly what it is."

I nodded. "Yeah, I've had the same feeling."

A heavy breath left my father's nostrils. "I don't want to lose you."



I snuggled into my father's side and wrapped my arms around his neck. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now get some sleep. We'll have a talk with the family tomorrow, once we're all rested and energized."

I nodded.

He brushed a kiss over my cheek before he got up and left.

I COULDN'T FALL ASLEEP.

My worry for Collin was all-consuming. I could still hear his bones creaking under the wolf.

That was when the vision had finally stopped, bringing me back to reality to kill the wolf.

I don't even know where I'd gotten the strength from. It must have been pure adrenaline from seeing Collin die a second time, except this time, it was real.

Although I had told my father that I had a strange feeling about Greg and his group, it was getting harder to see them as a potential threat. Collin had saved my life without a second thought tonight.

I wondered what he was going through.

Headlights swept through my window. Seconds later, there was a knock on our front door, followed by the murmur of voices.

I crawled out of bed, tiptoed quickly to my door, and opened it as softly as I could manage.

"—to be fine. The healing process will be long, but the doctor said everything went well. He's scheduled for another surgery in a few days, but the boy is strong, and he'll do fine."

"Thank you for updating us, Greg," my father said. My sister let out a cry of relief.

"Is Ru awake?" Greg asked.

"She's sleeping. Completely exhausted and devastated about what happened tonight, feels like it's her fault."

"Well, tell her she shouldn't."

"I'll make sure I do. Please give Collin my deepest thanks. When I see him again, I'll thank him properly."

"Will do. Good night, Huck."

"You too, Greg."

The door closed and I was about to close mine when my father spoke. "Liz, you need to get control of these outbursts."

"Dad, he almost died tonight!" my sister's whiny cry floated up the stairs.

"Your sister could've died tonight. You haven't shown an ounce of concern about that. You're focused on a boy who doesn't even feel the same way. He isn't family."

"I can't help the way I feel about him. I can't switch it off, Dad."

"You're in love with the illusion of him, honey. Collin isn't the guy you've made him out to be in your head."

"Dad, he saved Ru's life, for crying out loud."

"I know, and I'll be forever grateful for that. But you need to deal with this, Liz."

"I'm doing the best I can."

When her footsteps thumped on the stairs, I quietly shut my door, leaning my head against the wood.

She slammed her bedroom door behind her, and I flinched from the force of it.

I didn't know how to feel about anything. I was glad Collin was alive, but was he really out of danger? What if he didn't make it through the next surgery?

If he didn't, I'd lose my sister forever.

## NINE

COLLIN

I WOKE ABRUPTLY.

Ru's existence was now mine. Her life was written on my back as a tattoo. The mark was hers—her life's markings.

As long as I was alive, Ru would always exist.

It was never good when a wolf locked onto a human. But Ru carried a gift that belonged to the she-wolves. They were all blessed with the sight.

It was a pity that so few humans understood it. They thought they were mentally ill, like Ru's grandmother.

Ru's brother also carried the mark, though the family didn't realize what it signified.

It was the mark of the wolves.

If Ru or Theo got bitten by a werewolf, they would survive it.

Irrationally, instinctually, I wanted to track her down now and change her. But soon, it will be the only way to keep her alive. The visions were too strong. Her human body was too weak. She needed the wolf. Greg was right; I had no choice.

With the strength and ability to heal, her body could handle the visions without deteriorating.

I finally opened my eyes and saw Lee sitting next to my bed.

I cleared my throat. "Lee?"

She jumped up and started swatting softly at me with her hands, until her face crumpled and sobs wracked her body. She hugged me awkwardly.

"You could've died!" she screeched.

I firmly pushed her away. "Lee, you need to stop this."

"I can't, Collin."

"They think we are cousins. And things aren't like that between us, Lee. You know that."

"Oh, so screwing me meant nothing to you?"

"Lee." I sighed. "I have a true mate. Don't make me be nasty to you."

Lee sneered at me. "She is human, and a hunter at that. She'll never understand what that means."

"It doesn't matter. I can't help how I feel about her. So please... Leave."

She plopped back into the chair.

"I was heartbroken when you went for Liz. You didn't even take my feelings into consideration."

"Lee, you'll find another wolf. Hopefully even your lockpass. I don't love you. It was just hormones on steroids."

Her face twisted in rage. "That's all you have to say?"

"Yes. It was nothing but sex."

"I hate you!" She stormed away.

"Good," I replied.

Greg barged into my room and took the seat Lee had been using.

"Don't start with me, please." I fully expected him to tear into me because I'd pissed his daughter off.

Greg laughed. "I know what the lockpass does, Collin." His face turned serious. "You okay?"

I nodded.

"You have to sit the hunts out for about three months. The doctor said that's how long it would take for you to heal as a human. He's gonna come in and put you in a cast and a sling, and who knows what else."

I groaned. "Please no."

"You need to play the damn part and *heal* for the next three months."

"I can't. What if she dies?"

"If you're that worried, you've got to change her. The visions won't be kind to her body."

"I know. But... Ru's a hunter."

"A hunter that should've been a wolf. That entire family has wolf in them." He shook his head thoughtfully. "I think she might've told her father about the visions."

I tried to mask my surprise. "She did?"

"He's protecting her. He told me she was asleep when I could hear her listening to us. Do you think he would—"

I shook my head. "Huck loves his kids. He'd never have her committed. But he'll never agree to turn her. He thinks we are monsters, abominations. He'd rather kill her than allow her to become a wolf. That much I can promise you."

Greg ran a hand through his hair. "I'll speak to Huck and find out what he plans to do with Ru now. I'll tell him she's in danger with the hunts and that she needs time out as well. It will give you an opportunity to change her mind about all this, Collin."

My lips curved. Maybe this pretend-healing wouldn't be so hard after all.

Greg huffed and shook his head, but a grin stretched over his face. "You can thank me later. Now get some sleep like the doctor ordered."

He got up but paused at the door. "For what it's worth, you scared the living crap out of me. You need to be more careful. Without you, the wolves will be lost, Collin."

I nodded and he left.

WHILE I ALMOST COMPLETELY HEALED OVER the next few weeks, the hunters were told I was still barely holding on.

Being a werewolf was amazing. We had exceptional healing abilities, which was present in our saliva, so we were good after a few licks, but it was also in our blood.

During my extended stay at the hospital, I couldn't stop thinking about Ru. I was certain I was driving Greg up a wall with my incessant request for updates on her.

He'd been right about Huck knowing the truth. Her father was keeping her close. The news about her was vague and delayed. It made me want to get out bed and track her down so I could see for myself if she was okay.

But I had to stay put. I hated it. It made me feel like a damn dog.

Another three more weeks before the doctor, a shifter friend, would release me. I had kept up the charade.

Greg still hadn't told Huck about Ru needing to stay with me during the hunts.

With no control over when and where she got the visions, if it happened during another hunt, people could die.

If I hadn't been close to her, or even paying attention, she would have died that night.

The lockpass gave me mixed feelings. I couldn't distinguish between what was real and what wasn't. It was still amazing, but it was also truly messed up.

With the lockpass, your true mate became everything in your life, the air you needed to breathe. You couldn't survive without your mate. But if you locked on a human, when they passed on from this life, you couldn't follow. With the protection of their marking on your back, you would never die. And you couldn't commit suicide, because then you would never see them again. It was both a blessing and a curse.

The bond was real, though. It was not mumbo-jumbo crap, some magic wand wave and *Voilà! You only have eyes for your mate!* No, the process after the excruciating pain made you live their life as if you were part of it. You saw their first breath, their first steps, their first words... everything. You watched on the sidelines, learned what they loved, what they hated. You learned their true essence.

I now knew her better than I knew myself, and I would do anything for her. I'd give her anything she wanted. And that was what was sad. The people we locked onto had no idea, because they didn't get to see or feel our special bond.

I hadn't grown up with wolves. I had a family—a mom who died a few months ago, and a sister who hated me. I hadn't spoken to her in years—we'd never had a great relationship. We had the same mother but my father must have been from werewolf lineage. I had no idea what Jim, my sister's father, was—not human, because my sister wasn't ordinary. When she was little, she could do things that other humans couldn't. She could wield fire and lightning. When she cried, it rained, when she was happy, the sun blazed hot, and she had the ability to jump impossible distances. Once, she took me with her, and our relationship was never the same after that. I feared her.

After that, my mother bound my sister's abilities to her own life. My sister had been too young to remember the powers she once possessed, and when her abilities stopped, she carried on like a normal girl.

Lately, I'd been thinking about my sister. With my mother dead, my sister would reinherit her abilities, and there'd be no one there to help her understand it.

I couldn't do it. I had a bigger responsibility now.

And honestly, staying away from her was the best way to protect her. If the wolves ever learned of her existence, they would either want to change her or kill her. I couldn't even fathom what the vampires would do.

Letting her live her life away from all this was my only way of showing her that I loved her with all my heart.

That's what big brothers were for, right?

Tony found me in Madagascar, where I had been working on my thesis on Lemurs.

While staying at the same lodge he saw my mark. The mark of the one destined to bring werewolves together and keep them sane during the full moon.

He tried to explain it all to me. I'd thought I was losing my mind and tried to run away from fate. Eventually they caught up with me, and this was my life now.

Tony was an unstable werewolf, so Greg had killed him. I had still been a mess back then, fighting against my destiny, because Tony had wanted me to bring destruction. He had been erratic at best as a human; as a wolf, he would've fit in perfectly with the violent pack we'd destroyed a few weeks ago.

Greg and his pack helped me to make peace with my destiny. They quickly accepted me, and before I knew it, they'd made me



their Alpha.

That was the key for them to gain their conscience back during the full moon.

And now I was part of a lockpass I didn't want. Not because I didn't have feelings for her. Because she was human—and a hunter—and what the lockpass was when she would pass. I couldn't imagine going through life without the one person that gave it meaning.

Whoever gave us the lockpass... I wanted to thank them and curse them. They hadn't thought it through.

I had to get through to her, to make her understand that she needed the change or she would die.

Her gift must've come from her mother's side. Her brother bore the mark as well, but her father, uncle, and cousin did not. Liz didn't have the vision either.

Perhaps that was why wolves were after them. They were a family with so many candidates.

Only time would tell how our story would end, but one thing was certain: it wouldn't be easy. I still needed to tell her the truth, and I hoped with my entire existence that she would accept it. After all, my existence depended on it.

## TEN

RU

FROM THE MOMENT I told my family about my visions, my sister had been treating me like I had a deadly disease, and my brother treated me like I was as fragile as glass and could break at any moment.

It frustrated the hell out of me. After all, I was still me.

"She can't go hunting, Dad," both said when we got the call about next week's hunt.

"What if she gets another headache?" Theo asked, concerned.

"Dad," Liz said. "You know it's dangerous. Not just for Ru, but for the other hunters. Someone will try to save her. Someone could die."

"I'm right here!" I slammed my fist on the table.

Five heads snapped toward me, as if they were realizing for the first time I had been sitting at the table.

"I know it's frustrating, sweetheart, but they have valid points."

"I'm not a porcelain doll, Theo. You're just pissed because Collin saved me." I turned my glare on Liz, who gaped back.

"He almost died, Ru. What if it's me next time? Or Dad, or Theo? I'm sorry, but you'll only distract us."

If her precious Collin hadn't gotten hurt, she wouldn't be saying such things. My mouth tightened. "Please don't side with them. I can take care of myself."

He sighed.

"Your sister is right. We'll be too distracted, worrying about you."

"You're saying I have to stay behind... alone?"

"We'll make a plan. Give me a few days to think about this, and then we'll discuss."

That had been a week ago, and we still hadn't revisited the subject.

My sister hadn't said a word to me since, and neither had Theo or Will.

My father and uncle at least acknowledged my presence. I wish I had kept my mouth shut about my ability.

It was going to ruin everything.

"Ru," my father called from downstairs.

I slumped off my bed and trudged downstairs, sliding my feet on the floor as I walked.

My siblings were sitting at the kitchen table, and my eyes widened when I saw Greg sitting across from them.

"Oh hi," I said as I sat down. "How is Collin?" I didn't know why I asked it.

A soft smile tugged on the corner of Greg's lips.

"He's getting there. Grumpy that he can't join the hunt tomorrow. Apparently you are too."

"What?" I look incredulously over to my father.

"Ru, I made a choice," my father said. "You're a distraction and —"

"A distraction?" I scoffed. "I've saved your lives a dozen times without any of you realizing. What if I can't do that again? What will

happen when I'm not there?"

"Sweetheart, you can call us."

I crossed my arms and ground my teeth together.

"I know it's frustrating," Greg said.

My gaze darted back to him.

"Collin is upset about not being able to hunt, too."

I wanted to say that I didn't give a shit about Collin, but that would be a lie. He saved my life, and I owed him.

"I have a suggestion." He lifted his finger. "I'll understand if you're not happy with this, Huck, but I would feel better if Ru had someone with her while we were all on the hunt."

"Who?" Liz asked, eyes narrowed.

"Well, I suggest that Collin comes to stay here, to make sure Ru is safe and—"

"I don't need a babysitter."

Greg sighed. "To be honest, you're not the one who needs a babysitter, Ru. Collin does. He's been grumbling about not being able to hunt, but he's not ready. He hasn't healed. He can barely walk, and he'd be just as much of a distraction as you would be. He's not listening to us."

"And he'll listen to me?"

"No, but it would give him a purpose if he's asked to protect you. Not that you need protection. But please I'm at my wit's end with that boy." Greg's eyes pleaded with me.

"You want me to be a damsel in distress."

"To pretend. We all know you are anything but a damsel, but at least this way you'd have some company. Please," he begged.

I looked at my dad, my lips pursed.

"It's your choice, Ru."

Liz piped up, "If Collin needs—"

"No Liz," my father said, cutting her off.

"Dad."

"You are needed at the hunt. We were already two hunters down, and now Ru and Collin too. We can't afford to lose you."

The muscles in my sister's jaw ticked.

*Seriously? Could she be any more pathetic?*

Liz was becoming everything I thought my sister would never be.

I sighed.

"So, what will it be, Ru?"

"Fine, whatever. Doesn't seem like I've got a freaking choice in the matter."

"Ru!"

"Dad!" The chair screeched hard against the tiles as I stormed out of the kitchen and stopped to eavesdrop on the stairs.

"She isn't taking this lightly, Greg. None of us are."

"I can understand. Her gift is rare, and incredibly helpful. She gave us the time and intel to prepare for the last hunt. Without it... Well, I'm certain we would have failed. Take care of her, Huck."

"With my life."

"Tell her I say thank you. Genuinely." As his chair screeched, and I ran upstairs to my room.

Babysitting Collin? I guess I owed him that, at least.

LIZ WAS OUTSIDE, putting a bag for the hunting trip on the back of our truck while I looked on enviously.

"Sweetheart, please don't be upset. I won't be able to concentrate knowing that you might be in danger. At least with you staying home, I know you will be safe. And if that boy tries anything, anything at all, I'll kill him myself," my father said loudly.

"Dad!" I hissed, my cheeks flushing. Jeez, if Liz couldn't hold his attention, it's not like I had a chance in hell.

"Got it." Collin passed us on his crutches and my blush deepened. I raised an eyebrow at my dad. He did that on purpose.

My dad stopped Collin and held out his hand. "Thank you for saving my daughter's life."

Collin squinted at my father's hand for a few seconds before he shook it awkwardly. "Guess I was repaying the favor."

My father frowned.

"Her vision. I died first," Collin explained.

"Oh, sorry." Dad said. "Shotgun's in the kitchen, there's another in the living room, and here's pepper spray." He put a can in my coat pocket.

"For real, Dad? I can take care of myself."

"I know. But just in case." My father winked and walked out the door as Greg walked in.

"Thank you, Ru."

"Yeah, sure."

He walked past me to the lounge, where Collin had headed. I leaned against the wall, my ears perked to listen in.

"I'm doing this for you, you are not ready."

"Fine, whatever. You know she isn't a damsel in distress, right? I'm not stupid, Greg."

"Collin, please. You need to rest, and that is final." He turned on his heel and walked back to me. "I'm sorry for his mood. Seems he's not so stupid, after all."

Collin was a lot of things, but stupid wasn't one of them. I'd known he wouldn't buy into the damsel-in-distress spiel.

I watched everyone drive off. My brother waved at me, but my sister didn't even look at me. I wished she'd get over herself.

I stayed there until I couldn't see the trucks anymore, then I walked back into the house.

Collin was sitting on the couch in the lounge.

"You want a sandwich or something?" I asked.

He shifted his gaze to me, his expression something between annoyance and pissed off.

I laughed sarcastically. "You don't have to tell me, buddy. I feel the same as you." I stalked away.

I prepared a bologna sandwich with mustard and mayo, and I was pouring a glass of Coke when Collin swung into the kitchen on his crutches.

"A sandwich would be nice," he said.

"Okay."

He sighed and took a seat.

I knew exactly how he felt.

"I take it you told your family about your gift."

"You saving my life gave me no choice." I put his sandwich on a plate and set it in front of him with a glass of Coke.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," I replied, grabbing my own plate and sitting diagonally across from him.

"You do know that if I hadn't saved your life, you'd be dead, right?"

I nodded as I took a bite of my sandwich.

"Okay, so it's not my fault." He sounded unsure.

I rolled my eyes and swallowed. "I didn't say it was. I guess I should say thank you, and I'm glad you came out of it in one piece."

"Yeah, if only Greg would trust me."

"You think you're ready for another hunt? You can barely walk with those crutches."

"Hey, I can do a lot with them. I could hit some werewolves on the head with them."

I couldn't help but laugh.

"I'm serious!"

"No, you're right. Are your crutches made of silver?" I teased.

"No, but that's a brilliant idea."

"Collin," I sighed. "I was kidding. You're not ready, okay? We have to make peace with it. You will heal, and I... well, this is my future. A stay-at-home wifey that cleans and has dinner ready when the hunters come back."

He snorted.

"What?"

"You've got a point. I'll stop sulking. Seen anything else lately?"

I huffed. "Not really."

"What do you see anyway?"

"I told you before: hunts."

"Just hunts?"

"No," I grumbled.

"You see other things?"

I huffed. He was so annoying. "Yes. And no. I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay, fine." He picked up his sandwich and bit into it.

"Liz still upset with me?" he asked, breaking the silence that fell as we ate.

"She'll take you back, if that's what you want to know. I'm not her favorite person at the moment."

He studied me for a moment. "I don't want her back. I don't like it when hunters are upset with me. It's dangerous."

"She won't hurt you."



"I didn't mean that when I said it's dangerous. She's bait. She needs to concentrate. I don't want her to be pissed off because of what happened."

"Liz is a big girl, at least, I thought so. Lately, I don't know about a lot of things," I mumbled.

"I take it she's still pissed."

"Pretty much, yeah. It's pathetic. But you don't want to know about that."

"I'm sorry. I never should've have let it start."

"Why did you?"

"It's complicated."

"No, really. You need to explain."

"No, I don't." He sounded so sure of himself.

"No, you need to. I'll drive myself crazy if you don't."

He smiled. "Then that's your problem, right?"

"Oh? I won't tell. They think I'm two clucks away from cuckoo."

He roared with laughter.

"You can't do this to me."

"Sorry, Ru. I'm a guy of few words."

He grabbed his crutches and balanced them as he pushed himself up.

"Ugh!" I grunted. He was so frustrating.

I put the dishes in the sink and walked back to the lounge.

"So, which room can I use? And if you tell me that all of them are upstairs, I'm staying right here."

"No, Theo's room is around the corner. You can use his."

"Thanks." He picked up his bag and hopped toward Theo's room.

I watched him leave.

I could understand a little why pathetic Liz had come out to play. He was tall, muscular, and ridiculously handsome.

It had to be hard to get over what was between them.

I sat down on the couch and turned on the TV, flicking through the channels. None of the shows that were on seemed remotely familiar, but that wasn't a surprise. I never watched much TV.

I stopped on an image that grabbed my attention: high fantasy, swords clashing, castle walls, horses, and grimy faces. An idiot boy was king and I picked up in about two minutes that he was the biggest asshole ever. The rest of the characters intrigued me enough not to keep changing the channel.

Collin shuffled in.

"*Game of Thrones*?" Surprise colored his voice. He plopped down next to me.

"Game of what?"

"The show. It's called *Game of Thrones*. Have you never watched it?"

"I'm not much of a TV person."

"You haven't read the books?"

"Not my genre. If you haven't noticed, my life has enough fantasy in it."

Collin laughed. "This is a different kind of fantasy. There are wolves, but they're direwolves, not werewolves. These wolves are awesome. I wouldn't mind having one."

I laughed. "You know that they're probably not real."

"Oh no, these ones are and are fucking crazy expensive."

"Seriously?"

He nodded as he continued explaining the *Game of Thrones* world to me.

"You said there are books?"

"An entire series."

"Maybe I should get them."

"You can borrow mine. The author explains way too many things and my head hurt whenever I try to read it, but from what I managed to read, it's much better than the TV show."

I laughed, relishing his sense of humor.

"You'd actually be doing me a favor by taking off my hands," he said with a grin.

"I never took you for a reader."

"I have to do something in my free time."

"Sorry, I assumed you were the brawny type of guy, not the brainy type."

"Woah, an actual apology?"

"I have no problem giving them when I know I was wrong."

"Which has been how many times in your life?"

"Shut up before I break your other leg."

He chuckled and held up his hands in surrender.

We watched the rest of the episode and I had to admit, it was something I might grow to like. But I'd read the books first, to be sure.

I said goodnight around ten and went up to my room, leaving him in the lounge.

I wondered what my family was doing right now, and whether they were safe or not.

Would I be able to get a vision about the hunt when I wasn't nearby? How would I know if they were in danger?

I shouldn't have been here. I should have been with them.

I drifted off, hoping that whatever happened, my family would be okay.

## ELEVEN

COLLIN

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke up bright and early and started making breakfast.

Ru wasn't an early riser. She was more of a brunch girl.

I took advantage of the time by stretching my leg—the one in the cast—and to walking around like normal.

Last night, breaking the ice and being with her felt like old times. Old times that technically didn't exist, as I'd never spent real time with her before last night. Not time that she was aware of.

I still needed to reel her in, and that part was fatiguing for my brain to grasp.

Thanks to the lockpass, I knew Ru well, and she wouldn't respond well to being grabbed and kissed. I'd get a knee to the balls if I did that and she would feel guilty that my affection had shifted from her sister on to her.

She'd push me away out of respect for her sister.

I never should've led Liz on. It wasn't right. But in all fairness, Liz had thrown herself at me.

I sighed as I picked up my phone and started to play Candy Crush.

Minutes before noon, the floor creaked overhead as Ru shuffled around. She skulked into the kitchen shortly after.

I pretended to be immersed in my game.

"He cooks, too. Poor, poor Liz," Ru joked and I struggled to suppress my laughter.

"Good morning to you, too." I had to bite my tongue not to call her peanut, the way Huck did.

"Let me guess, you're an early riser."

"Someone has to feed the chickens and milk the cows."

"Haha, we don't have animals on this farm. Except Liz's lazy cat, but he seems to feed himself."

I laughed. "Grab yourself a plate, please."

"I'm not a breakfast person." She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down across from me.

I looked at my watch. "It's technically not breakfast anymore."

She looked over her shoulder at the food. "Fine." She got up, grabbed a plate, and dished it out.

She sat down and took a bite of her eggs and bacon. "What did you do with the eggs?"

"You don't like it?"

"No, it's yummy."

"Then it's my secret."

"Don't do that. I suck with breakfasts. I want to make my dad a nice breakfast for once. It's always *Liz this* and *Liz that*. Don't get me wrong; I love her to bits. But growing up in her shadow..." She shrugged. "I want to be great at something. One thing."

"Ru, you are. You can see the future. She can't."

"Not that. I was talking about eggs. These eggs. Please, what do you do?"

"It's grated cheese. That is what I do."

"Grated cheese?" She looked at her eggs. "Like what, you melt it into the eggs?"

"Yep. It gives it that gouda taste, doesn't it?"

"It's yummy." She took another bite.

"You're welcome."

"It's good to see you in a better mood."

I wrinkled my nose and huffed.

She laughed. "C'mon, it can't be that bad."

I gave her a skeptical glare.

"How bad?"

"Eight more weeks."

"Ouch. At least it's only eight more weeks. You're welcome to swap with me, seeing that you've got the cooking thing down."

I laughed. "No, thank you. If you want, I can teach you, since Greg will probably drop me off here every time a hunt takes place."

"You know he's only looking out for you, right?"

"Yeah, but I'm not that type of guy. I can take care of myself," I said to throw her off.

"Well, not according to them. Welcome to my world. We should actually run away and make them worry their asses off about us, that will teach them a lesson."

Yes please, I thought. But alas, I didn't have the courage to say it out loud.

"What? I was only joking. You look so serious."

I shook my head and smiled.

If only she knew how serious I was. Pretending to not want to be here was so difficult, but not touching her, when she could finally feel it, was twenty times harder. I didn't think about the hunt or Greg or how silly it was to be here and not there. I was happy where I was. I needed to plant the seed into her mind that we could be

together. How on earth could I do that with her sister looming over us?

All I knew was this was not the weekend to tell her about the complication.

I let her finish eating as I carried on with my game.

She did the dishes afterward and spent the afternoon asking me all sorts of questions about my time with my pack.

I hated lying to her about that, but I told her the truth as much as possible.

I told her everything I knew about the wolves.

"Your cast is hurting my eyes."

I looked down at my cast. "What do you want me to do about that?"

"I have an idea," she said as she got up from the chair and ran to her room. She came back down with a pencil case filled with markers.

"Really?"

"Please? That white is so glaring, I can feel a headache coming along. You know how I feel about them."

"Fine, doodle away," I said quickly.

We moved to the living room.

I took a seat on the couch, and she settled on the floor in front of my cast, grabbing markers and decorating my cast with a myriad of colors. "Don't make it too girly."

"I'm the artist, so shut your mouth," she said as she continued drawing.

"So, tell me what else your visions are showing you."

She grumbled under her breath. "I told you I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not? Is it too scary?" I asked with a laugh.

She looked up at me, biting down on her lip. "Something like that," she mumbled.

"Ru, what do you see? Tell me."

I knew the look she was giving me. She was frightened of something. If only she'd tell me what she was seeing.

"I don't think we'll succeed in finding the Alpha."

I frowned, feeling my heart rate pick up. "Why do you think that?"

"Because I see a war, Collin."

My eyes widened. Was she seeing the Great War?

"What kind of war?"

"One between monsters. On one side there are rows and rows of wolves, on the other, I don't know what they are, or what any of it means."

"This war... have you seen the outcome?"

She shot me a puzzled expression. *Shit, I shouldn't have asked her that.*

"It changes constantly."

"I don't understand. What do you mean it changes constantly?"

"I don't know what it means! I'm losing my mind."

I sighed. "Ru, you are not losing your mind. If you tell me what you've been seeing, I can help you decipher it."

She sighed and grabbed another marker, pulling the cap off with her teeth. "Sometimes I see the war happening, and it's never-ending." She took a deep breath as she continued scribbling on my cast. "Sometimes there's this girl. She's young, but the things she does, Collin..."

"What does she do?"

She shrugged. "It gonna sound insane."

"You can tell me."



"She can manipulate the elements of nature. I saw her. The wind howled at her command, fire sprang from her hands. Even lightning struck where she wanted it to. It's terrible when she's there."

"What side does she fight on?"

"Collin, it doesn't—"

"What side, Ru?" I asked sharply.

"The human side. Or the side that resemble humans."

"Not the wolves?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"The wolves never have a chance, except during the times they don't fight, but I've never seen that outcome."

I narrowed my eyes. "Who are you talking about?"

She smiled. "Sometimes it's a guy."

"I don't follow."

"When it's not the girl, it's a guy. He looked human, but I don't know what he is. He wanted peace, but the wolves refused. The one wolf who led the negotiations got attacked, but he got saved by another wolf who jumped in the middle. Then a vampire and a werewolf showed up."

"What?"

"I told you it's insane. It doesn't make sense."

"I'm sorry. I'm trying here. What do you mean a vampire and a wolf? How do they show up?"

"Together. Like they belong with one another, like a couple in love."

I stared at her. "Ru, vampires and werewolves are enemies." Could this be the breed that Greg had told me about? I knew the myths about hybrids, but I hadn't thought they existed.

It was hard to imagine that somewhere a vampire and a werewolf had fallen in love.

"That vision is usually the strangest one. There were so many things happening at once. It was as if the werewolf and the vampire tried to stop it. But the wolf that save the guy's life died and I didn't see her turning back into a human."

"Her?"

"Someone protected that side with something unexplainable. It was a huge, white dome that covered all of them. It was blinding with the light or magic coming from it." She looked up at me as she continued drawing.

"This is why I didn't want to tell anyone about this. It's nuts."

"Go on, Ru."

"Then the dome vanished and I saw the guy that wanted the peace losing it. He had a woman in his arms, and she was dying. A werewolf near her shifted into a wolf again, and..." She sighed. "It doesn't make any sense. It was as if her death made this guy change his mind. And then the flames came from him, the thunder, the lightning. He wielded it."

"The guy?"

"Yes, sometimes it's her, other times it's him, and then there's the war. I don't know which one is real. But whenever these two are in the vision, the wolves don't stand a chance."

I nodded.

"Are there really monsters that have that type of ability?"

"I don't know," I lied. It worried me. She said it was a woman. Morgan, my sister. My mother bound her abilities with her life, with my mother gone, my sister would be getting her abilities.

I was staying away to protect Morgan, but if Ru sees her in this life as one of them, fighting against the werewolves, how was that possible?

"I don't think we'll find the Alpha."

"Don't say that. Please. We need to find him."

"I don't want to find him!"

"Why not?"

She grabbed another marker and scribbled furiously on my cast. "Because we are going to die, Collin. We're all going to die. That war was between werewolves and vampires with other creatures in between. Creatures I've never even seen before. If we succeeded in killing the Alpha, werewolves would have been wiped out, and I would not have seen this war. So, it could only mean one thing. We are all going to die."

RU

TELLING COLLIN about my war vision lightened the load on my shoulders, but seeing the look on his face when I told him what I believed... It tore into my heart.

He was more worried about this than I was.

I couldn't tell him I was having visions of the Alpha. That I saw where he was sleeping, hiding.

I spent too much time wondering about the Alpha after I got that vision.

How did he get there? Did the humans entomb him?

Bury him alive?

With these visions, it was becoming harder to see some of these creatures as monsters. Especially the man that wanted peace and had to say goodbye to the woman he loved—the wolf.

I still had no idea what he was. I just knew he wasn't human.

The next morning, my family and Greg returned.

Collin and I were waiting in the kitchen, enjoying some coffee.

"This was fun," Collin said, smiling at me.

"Yeah, sure. Whatever," I sulked and he got up with his crutches and grabbed his backpack before he hobbled to the door.

"You look better," Greg said with a smirk.

"Yeah, I figure Ru has it way worse than me. So..."

"Shut up." I pretended to kick him on the butt as he clambered his way off the porch.

Greg laughed. "Thank you," he mouthed behind Collin's back and I shrugged, smiling.

I had to admit that it had been nice to not to be alone for two days.

My father kissed my temple. "You have fun?"

"It was okay. I made his cast more appealing."

He laughed.

My sister pushed past me without looking at or greeting me.

"How was the hunt?" I asked when we all—except Liz—settled in the kitchen.

"Touch and go. We trapped three wolves, and Greg will be interrogating them soon. I wonder how he disposes of them."

"Do you really think he's killing them?" I asked my father.

"He must be. I can't see why he would set them free, sweetheart."

"Dad, I don't think they'll ever give up their Alpha."

"Maybe not. But they won't stop trying."

"Give me all the gory details. I need to know how it went."

"Well, your sister almost got herself killed."

"What?" I yelled in outrage.

He shook his head. "I already gave her the lecture, peanut. These past two days haven't been easy on her."

I looked at my father, annoyed. "Collin was right. She was only going to get herself in trouble. She needs to get over this."

"She needs more time."

"And I assume Collin staying here with me while you're out hunting had absolutely nothing to do with her fantastic mood?" Sarcasm dripped off my every word.

"Give her time."

"Dad, she's being pathetic. Liz has never been like this. She needs to get over this and move on with her life."

"Give her time. She knows nothing happened here."

"Really?" I couldn't believe that was what was bothering my sister.

"Ru, please."

"No, Dad. She's my sister. I would never do that to her. She needs to know that."

I marched upstairs and knocked twice on her door before wrenching it open.

She was sprawled on her bed, looking up at the ceiling.

"Get out!"

"Stop this, Liz. What the fuck is wrong with you? We are sisters. This is why you are doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"You want to stay here, cooped up while everyone else is hunting? Well, be my guest. But Collin isn't stupid, Liz. He wouldn't toss you away just to take you back later."

"And you know everything he's thinking after two days together?"

"No, I don't. He told me he doesn't want you back. He even said that he never should've gone for you in the first place."

"That's a lie!" Liz shrieked, bolting upright

"You don't believe me? Then fucking call him and get him to tell you. I tried, Liz. You're my sister! I would do anything for you. You think I like seeing you like this? You hardly know the guy. This is not like you!"

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up," Liz bit out, her nostrils flaring with every word.

"I won't. You are better than this. Better than Collin. Snap out of this and grow a pair of balls. Not everyone is going to go apeshit over you. Move on. Being pathetic doesn't suit you."

I ducked as she threw her lamp at me and heard it smash against the wall, shattering into tiny pieces.

"Get out of my fucking room! You're the pathetic one with your little visions, and 'oh, I saved everyone. Yay me.'"

"That is what I'm talking about. I get that you are hurt, but you don't have the right to speak to me like that. You have no idea..." I took a breath. "I hate you." I stormed out.

"Good," she yelled.

I passed my father as I reached to my room.

"Ru, what did she say?"

"Nothing," I spit out and shut the door behind me.

If she didn't want to act like my sister anymore, then fine. What was happening with her? She had never been like this. I mulled it over in my mind.

Liz was always the best and always got what she wanted. She worked her ass off to be the best. And I never got in her way. It was exhausting to fight against her. She'd never failed at anything.

What if this was the real Liz under all her achievements, and she was finally showing her true self because she had no idea how to handle failure.

If this was the real her, I had no idea who my sister was, and Collin was right. She was dangerous.

## TWELVE

LIZ WOULDN'T EVEN LOOK at me anymore and refused to speak to me or accept my help in the kitchen.

It bothered me, but I could handle it.

Then one night she got a phone call and spent hours talking.

Her spirits raised, and she was almost back to normal. Was she talking to Collin again? If she was, I would kill him for making me sound like some lying, jealous freak.

She was also texting constantly, giggling whenever her phone beeped.

She was driving me up a wall.

I tried to ignore it. I mean my life was filled with more important stuff than my sister's dating life.

Another hunt was approaching.

Dad had asked Greg what happened to the werewolves they captured, but apparently Greg's reply had been vague.

I could see that it worried him. If they didn't kill them, then what did they do with them?

"You really think that they might be setting them free? Dad, they live for the kill as much as we do," Theo said.

"This is a different group, son."

I continued washing the dishes, trying to make as little noise as possible so I could hear what they said.



Liz was looking down at her phone again and laughing.

"Who are you talking to?" I snapped at her.

"None of your damn business," she snapped back and walked out of the kitchen, dialing a number with that excited look in her eye.

I could imagine Collin on the other side of that call and it bothered me more than it should.

Not that I had any idea why. Hell, if he wanted to take her back, then he could.

But after he'd told me he never should've let their relationship progress as far as it had what did this say about him? And if it was him, why was he doing this? To make me and my sister fight?

Nothing made sense to me.

My mind was so preoccupied with Liz's phone conversations, I didn't listen to the rest Dad and Theo's conversation. When I tuned into their conversation again, they were silent, and I turned my head to look at them. They both seemed deep in thought, worry marring the faces I loved.

That night, I had the same vision about the Alpha. It was almost as if he was calling out to me.

Why was I seeing this shit? To soften my view on the wolves? I was a hunter! I was meant to kill wolves.

I was taught to see wolves as sadistic monsters, but lately I didn't know what they were.

They could think and talk rationally. Monsters weren't rational. They killed, they loved the kill.

I froze. Did that make me a monster?

I loved the kill.

In the days before a hunt, I became furious because they wouldn't let me join. And I missed hunting.

I wasn't getting visions about their hunts anymore; now I only saw visions of the war and the Alpha.

It bothered me that my visions showed me three different versions of how the war would play out.

Why did I keep seeing this war? It had nothing to do with humans.

I needed answers, answers I doubted Collin would give me.

I eased into my old self when the hunt neared, and so did Liz. She was almost completely back to the Liz I knew, except she wasn't speaking to me.

She hated me for what I'd said. Collin had made me sound like a liar.

Idiot.

I watched Greg's truck roll up in front of our house the night before the next hunt. Collin opened his door and swung out on his crutches. I smiled to myself; he was more comfortable using them than before.

I was shocked when Liz ignored him completely. I'd thought she'd be all over him.

The corner of his mouth quirked up. He was unreadable. "Good evening, partner," he said in a Cowboy accent.

"Evening," I said sullenly.

"Ru," my father said. "If you get control over your visions, I'll be happy to have you hunt. Until then, this is it, kiddo."

"Yeah, whatever, Dad."

"Don't be mad. I love you and want to keep you safe."

"I know," I muttered on a sigh.

He brushed a kiss on my forehead. "Take care of my farm," he said to Collin.

"Got it," Collin said calmly with a grin.

I flicked my eyes over to Liz, and she quickly looked away when she saw me watching her.

Like last time, I stayed outside, leaning against the doorframe until I couldn't see the trucks anymore.

I went back inside and locked the door behind me. Determined to give Collin a piece of my mind, I practically flew to the kitchen, where he'd already made himself at home.

"You made me sound like a liar to Liz!"

"What now?"

"Forget it," I snapped, spinning on my heels to head to my room.

I should've stayed downstairs, but a nagging headache flared in my head, the oncoming vision driving me out of my mind.

My visions were becoming more frequent and I was left with more questions.

When the vision passed, I returned downstairs and found Collin in the living room, lounging on the couch and watching television.

He glanced at me as I sat down next to him, then returned his attention back to the television.

"I have questions," I said, my eyes glued to the television.

"Shoot." He sounded so relaxed, at ease with any potential question I might ask him. I hated that he didn't ask me what I'd meant earlier, but perhaps he knew exactly what I had been talking about.

"Why am I seeing wolves in my visions?"

From the corner of my eye, I saw him smile. I turned my head toward him, brow furrowed.

"You're not gonna like the answer to that question, Ru."

"Try me."

"You are not going to like that answer," he enunciated every word carefully.

I pursed, my lips, bouncing my foot on the floor, waiting.

Collin rubbed the back of his neck, pushing his head back into the couch cushion. "You're seeing wolves, and the hunts, and the war, because you are connected to the wolves."

I gulped audibly. "What?"

"Ru..."

"Shit. Shit, shit, shit." I closed my eyes. "Are you telling me I'm supposed to be a damn wolf?"

Collin blew out a breath. "Wolves can't change anyone at random. Only certain people."

My eyes flew open as I whirled my head toward him.

"What do you mean?"

Collin leaned forward, repositioning his leg. "Your mother, how did she die?"

"A wolf killed her."

"Are you sure the wolf wanted to kill her?"

A chill rushed up my spine. "What are you saying?"

"Sometimes wolves don't know their own strength. There are times when they've wanted to change someone but ended up killing them by accident."

"No. No. No! There's no way my mother was wolf material."

"How do you know?"

"She was married to a freaking hunter, Collin!"

He shrugged. "Did she have the same gift you have?"

"No. My dad would've told me. Only my grandmother had this."

"Your bloodline can be changed. Well, it seems only you and your brother can be changed, not the rest of your family."

"Theo can be changed?"

"The men all bear the mark. That mark on your brother isn't a normal birthmark, Ru. It's the mark of the wolves. Theo needs to be

careful. If they see it, wolves will attack him and try to change him."

"I don't have the mark."

"No, but you have the sight. All women have the sight, and they each see different things. If the wolves ever find out about you, they will come for you, Ru, and someone important will turn you, whether you want to be changed or not. Seeing the Great War as vividly as you do is extremely rare."

"But I see other things as well."

"It's normal for you to see a range of things while you're young. It'll stabilize eventually. You'll get the hang of the visions, and will be able to function normally, but it won't last."

"What do you mean?" My heart raced in anticipation of his next words, worry coursing through every vein.

"My mother once told me that human bodies can't handle the ability. Why do you think they change these women into werewolves?"

I pulled at my hair. "What are you saying?"

"Your will become sick, Ru. This ability will kill you in a few years."

"I have to become a monster if I don't want to die?" My mouth was suddenly dry.

"Not all of them are monsters, Ru. I grew up with a pack that didn't kill."

"How is that even possible?"

"They had cages during the full moon. Strong, silver cages that contained them. Werewolves weren't made to kill humans. We fear them because they are the unknown, but they have a bigger purpose in this life. They were created to kill vampires, but something went wrong during the blood moon and they became deranged. They started killing innocent humans, then they turned on

each other. The vampires were not a threat to them anymore. Many died that day, Ru. Many."

"Collin, why do you want to find the Alpha? Tell me the truth this time."

"Greg told you the truth. We want to find the Alpha so we can put all the wolves out of their misery."

"You know what I've seen in my visions, so that clearly isn't going to happen."

"I know. I told Greg, and he believes that visions aren't set in stone."

"He hasn't lived mine yet."

"But you manage to change it all the time, Ru. Your family is still alive because you're always saving their asses, changing the future. So, it's important that you tell me everything you see."

"I am," I lied.

He smiled. "Okay."

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. "Theo and I should be wolves?" I mumbled.

"I didn't say you should be. You wouldn't die if a wolf bit you, you would become wolves."

I groaned. "My dad is going to love that."

"Ru, you can't tell anyone about this."

I lifted my head to look at him. "Why not?"

"I mean it. You can't tell anyone. Trust me." He turned his attention back to the television, effectively dismissing the conversation.

As if I would even contemplate telling anyone. My sister wasn't speaking to me, and my father basically kept me on house arrest. If I told them about this, my father would probably have Theo sit hunts out as well, and then he'd hate me too.

I looked back at him. This new knowledge weighed heavily on my heart.

I huffed.

"What is it?" Collin asked.

"You say not all of them are killers. How do you kill them, Collin?"

Collin looked down at his lap, as silence grew between us. "I don't. I'm only present during the interrogation, and then I walk away," he finally said.

I was starting to feel sorry for the wolves. "Have you ever felt like you're betraying your family?"

"Every day," he said.

"I'm sorry."

He smiled as his eyes glazed over. "My mother told me that there would come a time when the wolves would all regain their memory during the full moon. They wouldn't kill humans anymore, and they'd finally do what they had been created to do. She believed that someone would come, born human, and that person alone would keep them sane during the full moon."

"One person?" I asked skeptically. It sounded insane.

He nodded. "When that person comes along, the wolves wouldn't need to be caged anymore. They'd be free to hunt the one thing they were meant to hunt—vampires."

"What about us?"

He smiled. "It's probably a myth. Greg laughed when I told him."

"Your mother believed this?"

"They all did. When Greg mentioned how he found me, he was lying. They were in the vicinity, but they didn't do the killing. My mother said that my cries woke her up, brought her out of her deranged thoughts. She broke out of her cage, and she came to my rescue. She killed the loner that attacked my family and didn't harm

me in the slightest. But it wasn't the same during the next full moon. She had to go back into her cage. And once again, I was alone during full moons."

"Those doesn't sound like happy memories."

He laughed. "It was only during full moons, and they hated it."

"So, you believe this Alpha can change everyone back?"

He shook his head. "Not the Alpha, someone else. As the story goes, the Alpha was irate. Werewolves were created to protect humans, but they've become part of the destruction instead. That was when the prophecy was made. A human with a different type of mark would be born and he would make them all sane. The Alpha said he would only wake once that happened."

"Hang on... then he won't be the Alpha anymore?"

"He'll still be the Alpha, Ru, but he'd have his beta at his side. Why is this getting under your skin?"

"It isn't. But... it puts the werewolves in a different light for me."

"It does, doesn't it?"

In fact, this was all making me feel like the monster. I loved the kill. If the wolves weren't supposed to be vile and evil...

Conflict raged through me. I had no idea how to feel anymore. I had the potential to become one, and that thought frightened me.

I had never known that only certain people would be able to survive the change.

My family had been hunting wolves all these years, and we knew so little about them—Collin had made me realize that.

He turned back to the TV show.

A part of me could understand why Liz morphed into such a pathetic person because of him. Collin was interesting and had an inexplicable magnetic pull about him. Not to mention he was insanely hot.



But he had more than looks going for him. There was something about his personality, the quietness that teetered on the brink of sadness, that beckoned to me. He seemed to have a gentle soul.

He didn't push, and he didn't annoy me as much as I thought he did.

Oh crap, I was falling for him.

My sister was going to kill me.

I cleared my throat. "I'm going to take a bath. There are leftovers in the fridge if you get hungry." My voice was both gruff and meek, not at all like how I usually sounded.

He simply nodded at me, and I walked upstairs.

I took a shower instead of a bath, and as the hot water ran over my body, I willed it to make me normal, to wash away this gift that would eventually kill me. If only the water had the ability to do that.

Collin knew so much about the wolves, and I sympathized with him for being forced to kill them now.

After my shower, I returned to the living room where Collin had a deck of cards laid out in solitaire in the coffee table.

"You love all the lonely games."

He chuckled and then I noticed what he was wearing: a T-shirt and a pair of boxers that showed off his sculpted legs.

"Something like that. You want to play gin or poker?"

"Dad doesn't like poker. He says it's one of the biggest sins out there. But I'm ready to learn if you teach me."

"A rebel, I like that" he said with a hint of what could be flirtation, but I decided not to read into it.

"It's fairly easy. I'll break it down for you."

I sat down next to him as he outlined the rules. It sounded easy, and once he was certain I had the hang of it, he dealt the first hand.

## THIRTEEN

SICK OF THE HOUSE, we went into town the next day. We played games at the old arcade and walked through the street fair. Collin even managed to get onto most of the rides with his cast.

As we walked side by side, my heart fluttered. My palms were sweaty. Butterflies fought a war in my stomach, and they flipped every time he smiled or made a joke. The way he smelled...

I was falling for him. I told myself he was off-limits, but I was completely head over heels.

Collin won a humongous teddy bear at a shooting game, and held it out to me.

I shook my head. "I can win my own stuff. Hold onto that bear," I teased.

Collin gave me a lopsided grin as I picked up the game gun, cocked it, and aimed, pulling the trigger in quick succession. Every duck went down before they'd even been fully raised on the platform.

Some onlookers applauded, and I gave a mock bow.

"I did exactly that and no one applauded me," Collin grumbled.

"I guess it's more interesting when a woman does it. We can do everything you can, but you can't do everything we can." I joked.

He looked unimpressed, but I saw the smile in his eyes.

"I'm kidding." I bumped him with my hip, then quickly grabbed his hand so he didn't topple over his cast.

We burst into a fit of giggles.

"Do you want me to break my other leg as well?"

"That's the plan. Then I won't have to sit alone at home once you're all healed up and ready to hunt."

"Ru, you know your father is right. You can rejoin when you get your gift under control."

"After what you told me last night, I don't know if I can kill wolves again, Collin."

"It's not easy. I shouldn't have said anything. I'm sorry."

"No, I'm glad you did. I already suspected they weren't all deranged like that pack we took out a month ago. The visions showed me that much."

"Yeah, I guess some monsters get their conscience back after years roaming this earth."

"Do you think they really are immortal?"

He smiled. "My dad, or the man that raised me, was part of the Alpha's pack. He's one of the ancients."

"How old is he?"

"More or less a thousand years old."

I gasped. "What?"

"He doesn't look that old, though."

"And Greg made a truce with them?"

He nodded. "They had to leave; it was my condition. Nobody followed them. I made sure of it."

"It's hard to trust hunters."

"Very."

"I'm sorry. It can't be easy to lose your family."

"That's part of life. They weren't really my family, and I did the one thing that I knew would keep them safe. I left."

"It still can't be easy."

"It's not. Can we change the subject, please?" he begged.

"Fine." I laughed.

We decided to head home, our two ridiculous teddy bears in tow.

The drive back was quiet, and I squirmed in the silence. I wanted to ask him why he was flirting with Liz again, but I couldn't build up the courage.

I didn't like that I was feeling like this. I didn't want to descend into the pathetic person Liz had been.

I needed to push these feelings aside because they would hurt me in the end.

When we returned, I said goodnight and started walking upstairs.

"Tonight was fun," Collin said.

"Yeah, very. Sleep tight."

"And don't let the bed bugs bite?" he asked.

"I can't speak for them. I'm pretty sure Theo has those."

He laughed after me. "You're mean, Ru."

I smiled as I walked into my room.

I moaned animatedly as I flopped face down on my bed. My first real crush, and it had to be on him?

I couldn't help it. Liz only wanted the best and Collin fell into that category.

But why was he talking to her again?

I'd just drifted off to sleep when I jolted awake. The clock on my nightstand read two a.m. I rubbed at my eyes, looking for the source of the commotion that had awoken me.

Headlights shone into my window And I stumbled downstairs in a rush and flew past the kitchen, where Collin was making coffee. I wrenched open the door as they stepped out of the trucks, and my breath caught in my lungs.

My father seemed completely out of it, and Greg was trying to hold him together. Tears filled my eyes.

Someone must have died.

I stepped backward to the kitchen, my hand tangling in my hair, eyes wide.

"Oh fuck." Collin grabbed his crutches and hobbled out the door.

Liz flashed through my mind as I tightened the grip on my hair.

*Please, please don't let it be my sister.*

One by one everyone walked in, their faces distraught.

Emily approached me and I shook my head as tears streamed down my cheeks.

"I'm so sorry."

"No," I muttered, my lower lip quivering.

I pushed Emily aside as Liz walked in and I grabbed her around her neck, squeezing her hard. I didn't care if she hated me. She was alive and that was all that mattered.

Her body shook through her sobs. If it wasn't her, then who? Will? Uncle Fernus?

She broke the hug and walked straight to Collin, and he wrapped his arms around her, stroking her back to soothe her.

"What is going on? Who is it?" I asked impatiently. If someone could tell me what the fuck was going on, I'd know what to do.

Greg brought my father in, and my uncle walked in behind him. Will followed.

Theo was missing.

A cold shiver ran up my spine.

"Where's Theo?" My voice broke. My father looked up, his eyes filled with tears.

"Dad, no." I didn't even feel the tears that streamed over my face as a sob wracked my body.

My father walked over to me and crushed me to him, our bodies shaking.

"I'm so sorry Ru," he whispered brokenly.

My dad squeezed me tighter as I screamed into his chest.

"No, no, no." It felt as if my strength had been pushed out of me.

My father caught as my body slackened, my legs giving way as the reality dawned on me.

My brother was dead.

EVERYONE STAYED with us until the sun came up. Emily took the role of comforter, cooking for us and giving us endless cups of coffee or tea. Greg and the few members that had joined him tended to us, silent in our grief.

Collin helped Liz to bed. Through my devastated haze, I noticed he was gone a long time.

My sister wouldn't use Theo's death to her advantage—that was pure evil. I mentally slapped myself, because I shouldn't be feeling like this right now.

Collin finally came down and everyone prepared to leave. I couldn't look at the door. My brother would never walk through that door again. A sob tore through me and I covered my face with my hands

"Ru." Collin pulled my hands away from my face and used his thumb to lift my chin. "I'm so sorry." He had an intense look in his eyes.

What was he trying to tell me?

He got up and hobbled out of the house on his crutches.

Numbness washed over me.

"What happened?" I asked my father, my eyes flicking over to Emily who was still hovering over us.

Liz shuffled into the kitchen. "You didn't see anything?" my sister asked in an accusatory tone.

"Of course, I didn't see anything. I would've called you," I snapped.

"Girls," my father yelled.

"We all lost him. And frankly, you were not there," Liz hissed at me.

"I don't see the hunts anymore because I'm not hunting anymore! I'm not there!" I yelled. "I can't do this anymore, Liz."

"What?" she spat out disdainfully.

"This. I don't know who you are anymore. What do you want from me?"

She sneered at me.

"Enough!" my father yelled. "I'm with Ru, honey. You've changed and you can't say anything nice to your sister."

"It's not fair, Dad!" Liz yelled.

"What isn't fair?"

"She should've been there. She could've seen it and stopped it but you keep her locked up like some princess. She is no use to us —"

"Not another word, Liz. You are talking about your sister. She is not some tool to be used." The veins in my father's neck protruded with his anger. "Does this have anything to do with that boy?"

Liz looked down on the floor.

"Do you want her to be alone on this farm, Liz? You want your sister to be unprotected? Do you want to come back and find that

she's not here, or dead? What will you do then?"

"Collin's on crutches, Dad. It's not like he'd be able to help. They'd kill him."

"You are fucking unbelievable," I growled and pushed past her out of the room.

"Who are you?"

"I don't know. I've never felt like this over anyone, Dad," Liz's whiny voice floated upstairs to me

"Honey, you have to let him go."

"I don't know how. It's not in me to give up."

"That doesn't excuse how you've been treating Ru. You treat her like she is a disease. You basically told her you don't care if she died."

"I know. I'm sorry. Of course I don't want that, Dad."

I leaned against my bedroom door.

This was all because of Collin. And I was falling for him.

"You got to work through this, honey. I can't lose another child." My father's voice broke.

"Daddy," Liz sobbed, and I quietly went into my room.

I curled into a ball and let my tears flow freely.

My brother was dead.

I cried myself to sleep and dreamed of Theo. He was happy in my dream. Collin was there and they were friends, and I was there too. We were all a big happy family, but something was off with Theo. He looked different.

His ears were enlarged.

"Why such big ears, brother?"

"To hear you better."

I smiled. Then I noticed his nose.

"What a big nose you have." I was saying the stupidest things.



"To smell you better."

I laughed as if it was a joke. Then I saw his teeth, larger and nearly protruding from his mouth.

"Why such big teeth, Theo?"

"To eat you better."

I jolted awake. It was a stupid nightmare. Probably because of what Collin said earlier.

It felt so real, and so far from reality.

My brother was dead.

THEO'S MEMORIAL was the following week.

The hunters planned it by the book even though there was no body to burn.

Will told me that a wolf bit him and dragged him away, like my first vision.

They found clothes, bloody clothes. Bits and pieces everywhere.

At the reception, Collin spoke to Liz on the tire swing.

Before Collin left, he walked over to me. Again, he told me he was sorry with that same, puzzling look in his eyes.

I wanted to ask him what the hell was going on but I was too angry that he was with Liz again.

He clearly had no idea how jealous she was about him having spent time with me.

He left with Greg and the others.

I passed my father as I entered the house. He was sitting on the porch, staring off into the distance, silent tears coursing down his face. He barely noticed when I squeezed his shoulder.

I trudged my way through the house to Theo's room. His room was always a mess, yet he always looked neat and put together. I picked a shirt up off the floor and lifted it to my nose.

A bleak emptiness settled in my gut as I sobbed into the shirt.  
He was gone. He was really gone. Even though it made no sense, I couldn't shake my dream.

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, Liz went back to chatting to Collin on her phone.

I wish he knew what he wanted.

I kept my distance from her. I didn't need her cold glares.

My phone beeped and I frowned as I pulled it out of my pocket. Nobody other than family had my number.

"You okay?"

I replied with a question mark.

"It's me, wolfboy."

"How did you get my number?"

"I asked your father."

"And he gave it to you?"

"*Damn. Busted.* I took it from his phone."

"Ooh, a rebel," I joked but it didn't reach my face. I wasn't sure I'd ever smile again. All the joy had been seeped from the world.

"Don't be sad, Ru, remember what I told you."

"About what?"

"The wolves, your family."

The dream popped into my head again and I gasped. "Do you think they changed him?"

"There was no body, Ru. They must have seen his mark."

"You think my brother is out there, living as a wolf?"

"Yes, we all do. He's alive."

"As a wolf, Collin."

"Not all of them are bad."

"He'll kill himself."

"Don't say that."

My fingers flew furiously over my screen. "It's the truth. He kills them. He'd rather die than become a wolf."

"Greg wants to see if he can track them. Make sure they have Theo."

"My father will kill them."

"You can't tell your father about this. And don't go looking for him either. The moment the wolves realize you have the sight, they WILL turn you. Steer clear, Ru. Please."

"Got it," I said.

He replied with a smiley face emoji.

So now he was texting me too.

*No way this ends well.*

ANOTHER HUNT WAS PLANNED in the coming weeks.

Liz seemed to be walking on air, and I resented her for it. It was like Theo's death—because she still believed he was dead—hadn't affected her at all. All she cared about was Collin.

I hated them both.

I was angry at Collin for texting me about my brother, and the whereabouts of the pack. I knew this inkling of hope would be ripped away from me.

But I didn't see my brother at all in any of my visions, only in my dreams, and they were just that—dreams.

Why couldn't I see him?

My father fell into a dark hole. He drowned himself in whiskey. He didn't eat, didn't sleep. He got drunk and stayed that way. The only time my sister seemed to be affected by Theo's death was when she was around Dad.

Uncle Fernus was distressed by my father's behavior, but there was nothing any of us could do to ease my father's pain.

Greg didn't think my family should hunt with them, but Dad wouldn't want it any other way.

My father was the first to leave for the hunt, the rest following after Collin was dropped off.

I had so many questions to ask Collin.

"Your dad's not doing well, is he?" Collin asked.

"Not at all," I murmured.

I waited until the trucks were out of sight before I walked into the house, leaving Collin to stand on the porch.

The door creaked and banged shut. His crutches squeaked with every step. "The cast finally comes off next week."

Yay, I thought sarcastically. I would be alone for two nights.

"Theo's still alive, Ru."

I whirled toward him so fast I almost lost my balance. "What?"

"Greg tracked the pack down. He is with them, he is going through the changing process."

"No!" To my surprise, Collin pulled me into his chest, guiding me to sit down. He awkwardly moved a chair closer with one hand, still holding me as he sat down.

I broke down, sobbing and sniffing over his chest. Theo was a wolf.

"You can't tell your father, Ru. He can't know. I'm sorry."

"I want to see him."

"The pack left when they found out we were on their tracks."

"How does it work? You said he's going through the process?"

"It takes sixty days. He won't shift during the first full moon, but he will get the bloodlust to hunt vampires. But because they're deranged, they kill the first thing they set their sights on."

"He'll kill a human."

"Let's hope not."

"Dammit!" I screamed.

"We're trying to track the pack down again."

"And then what? Greg will kill him."

"Ru," he said.

"I can't. Please."

"Your brother will be put out of his misery."

I pounded my fists on Collin's chest. "He's my brother."

Collin grabbed my hands and looked straight in my eyes. "What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to help him. Bring him to your old pack. Please."

"If I go back, I'll be putting their lives in jeopardy."

"He is my brother, Collin."

"Ru." He sighed and closed his eyes. "You said Theo wouldn't want this."

"I don't know. I can't imagine him not being in this world anymore."

Collin remained silent. I could see the wheels turning in his head.

"I'll see what I can do."

I wrapped my arms around his neck. "Thank you. Thank you."

"You can't tell your dad, Ru. You can't tell anyone."

I nodded.

"And you have to stop crying."

Laughter bubbled out of me for the first time since Theo disappeared. Through my snot and tears and wiped at my eyes.

"That's better."

"Can I come with you?"

He shook his head. "Hell no. You need to stay far away from the wolves."

"But you said that my body won't last long."

"I know." He sounded so defeated. "I think that the wolf tried to change you that night. He saw what you were going through."

"They knew?"

"Yes. But they are all dead, Ru."

I chewed on my thumb "My father was right. I can never hunt again."

"I'm sorry, Ru."

"My life is over," I said, shaking my head.

"It's not over. You can get out of the hunting game. Start fresh."

"Knowing that anyone around me could be a werewolf and I wouldn't know it." I slumped backward in my chair. "Please do whatever you can to help Theo. I'll keep my mouth shut. I promise."

"I know you will."

Collin told me more about his family while we cooked dinner. He was sure they would take Theo in and help him adjust to his new life. It would be hard for him not to come back to us, but I could see him. Even if it was only in my dreams.

I still didn't understand the dream, but everyone was happy in it.

I felt better the next morning, but worry about the hunt started creeping in.

Collin tried to distract me with a *Game of Thrones* binge. At first, he tried to answer all my questions, but eventually told me to shut up and watch the show.

The show was addictive, but hard to follow. I'd have to read the books to understand it.

I could understand why Collin wanted a direwolf. They were huge and primal.

When the sky started darkening, we went into town to get pizza.

I laughed as he sang along to the radio.

He was uptight, yet also carefree.

He belted out a note to mimic Adam Levine's voice. "Don't laugh."

I giggled even harder.

We ate the pizza there instead of taking it back to the farm. I needed the break.

As I bit into a slice of the pizza, I noticed every girl in the place was looking at Collin like he was a piece of meat.

I chuckled to myself.

"What?"

"You don't see it, do you?"

"See what?" Confused, he looked around, and all the longing stares darted back down to their plates.

"No wonder Liz is so smitten."

"Haha." He chucked a piece of pizza crust at me.

"It's the truth."

"Well, if they knew what was good for them, they'd look in the opposite direction."

"Our lives are adventurous. Well, your life is. Mine just died."

"Ru, you didn't die."

"Not yet."

He burst out laughing. "Okay, I can't compete with that."

He paid for the pizza and we headed back home.

The farm looked empty and depressing.

But he was right, my life wasn't completely over.

We returned to the living room and continued watching *Game of Thrones*.

Time with Collin was amazing. He took my mind off everything and made me laugh.

He kept glancing down at his watch.

I sighed. "She can take care of herself, Collin. She'll be fine."

"Huh?" He sounded confused.

"Liz will be fine."

"I know she'll be fine. You Chaperon women can look after themselves, Ru."

"Then why the worrying? and looking at your watch?"

He smiled. "Not Liz, that I can promise you."

"Then what?"

He bent toward me and planted his lips on mine.

I froze for a moment, but then my lips moved to kiss him back.

I melted into him as heat swirled in my belly.

I wanted the kiss to never stop. He tasted amazing. It felt as if I was under a spell. His spell.

He pulled me on top of him, our bodies flush together. His hand drew up the hem of my shirt, his fingers trailing over my lower back. I worked my fingers through his hair as his tongue swept over my palate.

Suddenly, an image of Liz flashed through my mind.

I jumped off him.

"What the hell was that?" I asked.

He frowned at me. "The reason I kept looking at my watch. Ru, you drive me insane."

"I drive you insane?" I gave a sarcastic laugh. "And what, for weeks you text Liz to sweep her off her feet again? She's my sister, and she's nuts over you."

"What?"

"I can't do this."

"I haven't been texting Liz. I've only been texting you. I told you before, the situation with your sister was complicated. It was only complicated because of you."



His words took me by surprise. "What?"

"Liz is so open. It sucked me straight in, but it wasn't about her, Ru. It was always about getting close to you. It's why I broke it off."

"You broke it off with Liz because of me?" I blinked, trying to wrap my head around the words.

"Yes. Why is that hard to believe? You and I are the same. Liz and I were never compatible. I thought if we could become friends then I could get closer to you, but then she kissed me. I was confused for a moment about what I felt for her, but I quickly realized I didn't have feelings for her. I never should've done what I did. And I'm sorry, but if you—"

I grabbed the sides of his head and kissed him. He wasn't texting Liz and he didn't want her. He wanted me.

## FOURTEEN

I YANKED Collin's shirt over his head, as he removed my jacket, leaving me in my tank top and jeans.

His hands roamed over my body as I kissed down his chest and back up to his neck. My chest heaved as I moved back to his mouth, knotting my fingers in his hair, my body on fire.

The sound of trucks made us jump apart, and we were both on our feet in seconds. I threw him his shirt, my cheeks flushing as I pulled on my hoody. He put his shirt on and brushed his hands through his hair while I tried to calm the heat still swirling inside me.

"Don't look at me like that." I hissed, slapping him lightly on his arm.

He winked at me and grinned. "Guess your life is not so bad after all."

"My sister is going to kill me."

He pulled me back and I smashed into his chest.

I kissed him quickly and firmly turned around.

He laughed as I smoothed out my clothes, wiping my hands on my jeans.

Fuck, that was amazing.

The door opened and my father trudged in, walking straight upstairs without looking at me or greeting me.

Greg called him back, but he received no response.

"Let's go," Greg said to Collin.

"See you later," he said as he passed me.

"Later," I said, eyes on my sister, who was watching Collin as he left. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I didn't want to see the desire in her eyes.

Will and my uncle came in behind her.

"Is Huck okay?" Collin asked Greg.

"He'll be fine. Have a good night, Ru." Greg's smile said he could see straight through me.

I blushed.

"Stop giving your dad a heart attack, Liz. It was a close call tonight. Get your head out of the clouds. He can't lose another child."

"I'm sorry." She turned and stormed to her room, without a word to me.

"Everything okay?" I asked my cousin. He nodded and walked away.

Guilt washed over me, but I squashed it down. I deserved a tiny amount of happiness. And Liz had been flirting and texting all this time. If it wasn't Collin, then who the hell was it?

I shrugged and went upstairs to take a cold shower.

I got into bed and grabbed my phone, smiling when I saw a text from Collin.

"That was entertaining. We should do that again, and soon."

"I'm surrounded by people who would notice if I'm gone."

"Then I guess I'd have to sneak in."

"Liz has exceptional hearing."

"She won't find out. Besides, she'll have to make peace with this someday."

"Someday? So now you're seeing a future for us?"

"This wasn't a one-night thing, Ru. That's a promise."

*Yay me.* Telling Liz about this would be fun. She already hated my guts because he stayed with me while they hunted.

We said goodnight and I tried to fall asleep, but I could still feel his lips on mine, could still feel his hands on my body.

Collin knew how to make a girl feel special.

I shouldn't be feeling this way about him.

This would break my relationship with my sister, but how could I stay away from him?

I loved him as much as she did, but he only had feelings for me.

*The choice should lie with him, shouldn't it?*

If she loved him, she would want him to be happy, even if it was with me.

I hated this. I had no idea how to hide it from her. But Liz could never know that Collin was seeing me. *Never.*

THE NEXT FEW weeks sped by, and Collin's cast finally came off. Now I'd be alone, because Collin would be rejoining the hunts.

Collin snuck into my room a few times.

He always gave me a mini heart attack because he was so stealthy and quiet.

He must have picked it up when he lived with the pack, because he called it a wolf thing.

I guess growing up with a pack of wolves had advantages.

Our nights were intense. I'd had to stop a few times, because we were moving too fast. Not that I wanted to, but I'd never had sex before. I wanted it to be special, as clichéd as that sounded.

Collin never pushed for more. He was perfect. It was hard to hide the fact that he had been in my room the morning after, but luckily, I managed to hide it around Liz.

She was talking to someone again, laughing and I could have sworn it was Collin.

What if he was lying to me?

But I didn't think he would.

He and another member of his group, Tommy, whom he trusted, found the pack that changed Theo and I was waiting for them in the barn.

I needed to see my brother before Collin took him away to his old pack. I wanted to know if he was okay.

I glanced at my watch. Collin had said he'd bring Theo over at two, and it was already two-thirty.

Worry was taking over me. What if something had happened?

The door of the barn opened and Collin stepped inside.

I rushed toward him and crashed into him, hugging him as tight as I could.

"Why are you so late?"

"Sorry, we had to be careful." He pulled away from me.

Tommy stood by the entrance.

"Hi Ru," he smiled.

"He knows?"

"Of course he knows. Don't worry; his lips are sealed."

"Better be."

Just then, Theo walked in. Tears pricked my eyes and my throat was suddenly dry as I ran to him.

He embraced me, inhaling my scent.

"I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. Way better than having you die on us. I mean, for real."

"How is this better Ru? Dad, Liz, Will, everyone would kill the monster I'm becoming."

"Collin will find the Alpha. I promise. Then you'll come home."

His eyes moving over my face as if trying to memorize every feature. "I love you, Ru."

"I love you more. Hold on a little longer, okay? We'll get this sorted out."

"You didn't tell Dad, did you?"

"No. They all think you're dead."

"I wish I could tell him."

"He wouldn't understand, Theo. You have to trust Collin. Not all wolves are monsters. His pack will take good care of you. I promise. And when it's all over, you'll be free."

He nodded.

Collin cleared his throat. "Ru, we need to go. It's a long trip."

I nodded. "Okay. Be safe. I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you."

"I can take care of myself." He smiled.

I gave Collin a lingering kiss. "You be safe too, okay?"

He nodded at me.

"She's going to rip you apart, Ru," Theo said.

"I didn't plan this, Theo. You can't choose who you fall in love with."

"I know, Ru." Theo blew out a breath. "But she's family. You need to tell her."

"I will."

"Soon, Ru."

"Okay, Theo. You better leave. Take care. I love you." I smiled.

"I'll see you soon," Collin winked and they left.

TIME SEEMED to slow down after that day.

Collin texted me a few times to tell me they had reached his pack and that they agreed to look after him until Collin and Greg could deal with the Alpha.

Then finally, he said he'd see me tonight.

I was delighted that my brother was alive and safe. I had no idea if I would ever be able to kill a wolf again, now that I knew my brother was one and knew what they were meant for.

How was I going to deliver that death shot?

There was no way I could.

Collin slipped into my room in the early hours of the morning, the sky still pitch-black as he crawled into my bed.

My lips found his, my tongue tracing his lips to tease them open. I arched my back, pushing my chest up against him, deepening the kiss as I twined my arms around his neck.

"Ru, slow down, baby. You're making me crazy," he panted in my ear.

I giggled into his shoulder, feeling his hardness pressing into my thigh.

I liked knowing I did that to him and that this feeling was mutual.

We kissed until the faintest hints of the sunrise peeked over the horizon. He pulled away from me with a groan, then gave me a last kiss goodbye before he slipped out of my window, giddy with love.

Guilt always settled heavily on my chest once he left.

Theo was right. I had to tell Liz. But how?

THE NEXT HUNT loomed on the horizon.

I wasn't going to be there and Collin wasn't going to be here with me. Double damn.

But when it was time for the hunt, Collin got dropped off at the farm once again.

"You're not joining us?" Liz asked, perplexed.

"No. The doctor thinks it's best if I rest up for another week. Apparently, my leg still needs time to adjust. Doctor's orders."

She huffed and strode toward the truck.

She hadn't even said goodbye to me. What if she died tonight?

My father brushed a kiss over my cheek as a way of saying goodbye and hurried to the truck.

Theo weighed heavily on him. He was his only son, the only one to carry on with the Chaperon name, but my brother was a wolf now.

Greg spoke softly to Collin, telling him he needed to rest and needed to be careful.

When they were all gone, I turned to Collin.

"Did the doctor really book you off for another week?"

"No." He grinned wryly at me. "But I had to tell the others that."

"And the next hunt?"

"I'll deal with that when the time comes. I'll reach out to your dad."

"About what?" I asked, my voice wavering.

"Relax, babe. You and I can talk about hunting again, Ru. Yes, you must stay away from werewolves, but there are other ways to join the hunt without broadcasting who you are."

I quirked an eyebrow. "Precisely how are you going to convince him to let me back on the hunts? With Theo..."

"I'll tell him that I'll be watching you."

"And who is going to watch Liz?"

"Fred will. He's done a fantastic job so far."

"Fred? Is he the one she's been texting?"



"Who cares? Come here." He grabbed my arm, pulling me tight against him. My legs twirled around his waist as he picked me up, and I chuckled as he practically ran upstairs to my room.

He gently lowered me to the bed, and kissed me hungrily. It felt like his mouth was claiming me, every kiss branding and searing into me.

"Fuck, I missed you," he growled.

"Well, it feels wonderful to be missed," I teased nipping at his bottom lip with my teeth.

"Sorry, I know we should take this slow and easy, but it's anything but easy when I'm with you."

I loved the way he made me feel smart about my choices by respecting it, but I wanted to be stupid with him.

Being with him like this, heady with want and lust, made me want to take that next step with him.

I rolled on top him, straddling his waist and pinning down his arms.

"You're driving me crazy," he groaned roughly as I bent down to kiss his neck. "You're not playing fair, Ru."

"Then you shouldn't have opted to stay with me tonight, Collin," I whispered against his skin.

I pulled back with a sultry smile. Heat danced in his eyes. He caught my mouth in another kiss, and I rolled my hips as our tongues tangled together.

He rolled me over, settling himself between my legs, his one hand inching under my shirt, his hot fingertips trailing over the skin of my abdomen.

I grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it off, my hands skimming over his warm skin.

His hands roamed further under my shirt igniting every inch he touched. His weight pressed me down, but I relished the feel of him on me. With our lips fused together, I wanted to stay like this forever.

My hands inched between us until I had a grip on his belt. I pulled on it, wanting it loose, wanting it off. I wanted—needed—skin on skin.

“Woah, Ru,” he stopped and moved back, sitting at the end of my bed. “What are you doing?”

I froze. “What do you mean?” My stomach dropped, the heady haze of lust clearing at the rejection. “You don’t want this?”

A chuckle left his mouth. “Are you kidding?”

“I’m serious. I thought this was what you wanted.” I was on the verge of crying, my throat thick with emotion. It was silent for a beat as I waited for him to say something.

“I do, like you can’t believe. But I don’t want to do anything if you aren’t completely ready.”

I felt like an idiot for getting upset. I wouldn’t even have touched his pants if I wasn’t sure.

I push myself up and sat next to him, kissing his shoulder. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone else. I know this is moving fast, but I want this as much as you do.”

He looked at me intensely for a single heartbeat, then he grabbed me again.

My heart raced, blood rushing in my ears as he kissed me so fiercely, I thought I was going to blackout.

He pushed me back on the bed, settling on top of me again, and I twined my legs around him.

His hardness pressed against me, the friction sending tingles through my body.

Something between a moan and a sigh escaped my lips as he continued moving against me. Then suddenly, he stopped, wrenching his lips from mine.

"Fuck," he muttered, resting his head on my stomach. He pulled my shirt up an inch and planted his lips on my bare skin, groaning against me. It was as if he was in pain.

"What now?" I asked.

"I don't have a condom."

I giggled.

"Safe sex, Ru. Don't say it doesn't matter."

"I wasn't going to. But you better go get some. There's no way I'll survive this tonight."

"I'll go to the gas station. Stay here. Don't move."

I laughed as he got up and put on his shirt, my eyes lingering on the bulge in his pants. I pressed a hand to my mouth, unable to stifle my laughter.

"Read *Game of Thrones*." He put the book down on my nightstand and leaned over to kiss me. "Don't fall asleep."

I watched him leave, my stomach tightening into a ball of nerves.

Now was the time to rethink things, but I realized I had no doubts. I was ready to lose my virginity, and I wanted it to be with him.

I didn't want anyone else to be my first.

An unwanted thought slipped into my head. Had Collin slept with Liz? I don't know how I'd feel about it if he had.

As the rumble of his truck faded, I decided a shower would get the thought of Collin and my sister out of my mind. Besides, I'd rather not have stubbly legs and armpits tonight.

WHEN I GOT out of the shower, Collin still hadn't returned.

As the minutes ticked by, worry and fear settled into my stomach.

I sent him a text, but he didn't reply.

He didn't answer when I called.

Shit, fuck. Please be okay.

Collin was a hunter and could take care of himself. He was healed, and he could drive.

But a nagging voice in my head made me worried. What if werewolves had found him?

I settled on my bed and picked up *A Game of Thrones*, hoping the big tome would distract me, but it was no use.

Images of a pack shredding Collin to pieces flashed through my mind's eye.

*Stop thinking this shit, Ru.*

I didn't pay attention to anything I was reading and found myself having to read the same sentence multiple times.

Finally, a truck rumbled in the distance. I jumped up and peeked through the curtain. He was back. I lay back on my bed and feigned sleep.

He walked into the house and locked the front door, the sound of his steps like a familiar song.

He ran upstairs. "Ru!" He burst into my room.

I fought the urge to open my eyes.

"You've got to be shitting me," he whined. It was hard not to give myself away.

My bed dipped under his weight as he sat down and let out a heavy sigh.

Something loud fell on the night stand and then his lips touched my head.

He smelled so amazing.

He sat up. His shoes clunked to the floor.

I peeked through one eye. He was sitting with his back to me.

I jumped up and pounced on him, and his body jerked.

"You little shit." He leapt up. "You want to give me a heart attack?" He clutched at his chest with one hand.

I laughed.

"It's not funny, Ru," he said sternly, but his mouth twitched.

He took off his shirt, and I gasped when I saw the mark on him.

"What?" He glanced down. "Oh that."

"You're like Theo. Why didn't they change you?"

"I told you not all wolves are insane. Perhaps they didn't want that life for me."

I felt even more sorry for him.

"How did you not know I have that?" he teased.

"Probably because I'm distracted whenever your shirt's off," I joked and gasped again when he slightly turned around and showed me the mother of a tattoo on his back. "Sit down." I settled on my knees behind him. I trailed my fingers over the dark ink spread over his back.

"Too much?" he asked.

A soft chuckle left my mouth. "No, I've never seen anything this beautiful." I stared at the intriguing shapes and curls of his tattoo. It was a design I'd never seen before.

"I agree." He was looking at me over his shoulder, and I felt a blush spread over my cheeks.

His lips touched mine and then he pinned my body back on to the bed.

We quickly picked things up where we had left off.

He moved on top of me again, grinding into me. My head fell back against the pillow and he followed my lips with his.

Soft moans left my mouth, muffled by his lips.

This wolfboy was all mine.

My lips shifted down to the soft skin of his neck and my teeth gently scraped his flesh.

He groaned and found my mouth again.

He was hungry for me.

He slipped his hands under my shirt and cupped my breast.

"You took a shower," he murmured against my lips.

"I had to pass the time, you took forever."

"Sorry." He broke the kiss. "The gas station was out and I had to drive to another one."

"I thought you were always prepared."

"What would you have thought about my agenda if I came prepared?"

I giggled. Flirting was so easy with him.

He moved his lips to my ear. "Are you dead sure about this, Ru?"

"Like a corpse," I whispered back. He pulled my tank top over my head, and I was struck with a sudden shyness, having never been naked in front of a guy before. His lips wandered down to my chest and caressed my breasts before he took my nipple into his mouth.

My breath came out in slow, heavy pants, and my eyes fluttered closed.

He undid the button on my jeans, slowly pulling the zipper down. He inched my jeans down, and I started giggling as he struggled to get them off while refusing to move his lips away from my skin.

I opened my eyes, the light from my lamp glaring into my eyes.

I read in one of my sister's Cosmopolitan magazines that men liked it when the light was on so they could see your body, but I was incredibly shy.

He managed to pull my jeans off, revealing my naked body to him—I'd decided against underwear after my shower.

"You don't waste any time, do you?"

"Apparently not." I said, biting my lip shyly.

He wiggled the covers from underneath me and pulled it over us, then paused to kick off his jeans. He was still wearing his boxers when he settled between my legs, the sensation heightened now that I was naked beneath him. Our kisses became more frantic like we couldn't decide whether to keep our lips together or suck on each other's skin.

He nibbled the sensitive skin in my neck and I could feel myself pulsing slightly from the friction between us. The thin material of his boxers was the only thing separating him from being inside me.

I wanted him so badly, I thought I would die. A part of me told me that I loved him, but I pushed that aside, for now.

His hand fumbled toward my nightstand—probably for the condoms—and then his lips left mine. I kissed his shoulder as he tore open the box with his teeth and fished out a condom.

He rolled off me and onto his back as he ripped off the foil. I turned on my side to watch him curiously.

He slipped his hand under the sheets, lifting his hips to shimmy out of his boxers. I watched as he stroked himself under the sheets, rolling the condom down his length. In the future, I wanted to help him with that, but right now, I let him do it.

His face turned serious.

"I still feel the same. No doubts." I cupped his cheek and kissed him.

"If I do something you don't like, you have to tell me," he murmured against my lips.

"Okay."

He pushed me back, then his hand grazed down my body to my sex, brushing over my folds, sparking shocks of pleasure I had never felt before.

His finger glided inside of me and I saw stars. It felt so mind-blowingly good.

I couldn't remember why I had waited so long.

"You okay?" he asked and my eyes flew open.

"Don't look at me."

"I need to see if you like this."

"I love this," I croaked out, my cheeks reddening.

He chuckled and leaned down for a kiss, continuing the torturously slow pace of his finger. His thumb brushed over my sensitive nub, and I moaned into his neck.

"You okay?" he asked and I nodded. "Tell me when you are close."

"I don't know. I've never done anything like this before." My breaths came out in pants.

I felt his chest shake against me. "You will know. Believe me, you'll know."

I felt so stupid that I didn't know anything. Sure, I'd read about orgasms, but I'd never experienced it. I'd never dared to explore my own body. It made me feel so dirty, like everyone would know. But this... this didn't feel dirty at all, it felt heavenly.

He pushed another finger inside of me. I whimpered as his tongue flicked over my earlobe before he closed his teeth over it.

"You like that?"

I nodded, beyond words.

I groaned when he pulled his fingers out, gliding them over my throbbing sex, then slipping them inside me again. My hips moved involuntarily, as the tension in my body coiled tighter.



My belly fluttered, and the muscles in my thighs flexed. Whatever was happening to my body made me want to laugh and cry out simultaneously.

It kept building as he quickened his pace, and my breath increased with every slide of his fingers.

"You close?"

"I think so," I gasped.

"We can stop if you want to."

"Don't you dare," I practically growled.

"Sorry." He grinned down at me, his eyes shining with lust.

He moved on top of me, pushing his fingers deeper.

I moaned and gasped for air.

He sucked on my neck as he shifted, his hand leaving me. I groaned at the loss, but then his hard length slid over my sex, and he guided the tip to my entrance.

I gasped as he eased his way in inch by inch. There was a moment of searing pain as he breached my hymen, and he stilled, waiting for my body to adjust to him.

"You okay?" His breaths were short and heavy.

"Don't stop," I moaned, and his lips covered mine. Soon pinpricks of pleasure replaced the pain as he started moving slowly again. I brought my legs up and around his waist, my hands splayed over his back. With my body, I urged him to move faster, my lips breaking away from his as I gulped in air.

"Oh fuck." I clamped my teeth into his shoulder.

A gnawing ache spread through my belly as he moved faster, my breasts skimming against his chest with every thrust. I dug my nails into his back as the ache spread.

He let out a grunt, and I released my grip on his back, muttering a breathless apology.

"No, it feels good. You okay?"

I nodded tightly.

"This pace okay?"

"Stop talking."

He chuckled against my skin, then lifted his lips to mine.

This was like nothing I had ever felt before, and our sweat-slicked skin sliding together felt so good that I had no idea how I had gone so long without it.

I'd always thought the first time would be excruciatingly painful, but apart from that one moment of pain, this was nothing but bliss.

My lips left him as I cried out, my body tensing and my toes curling from the pleasure.

He slowed his pace, but I dug my heels into his ass, my hips moving to meet his strokes.

"Don't stop, please don't stop"

An electric warmth spread over me, and all the tension seemed to leave my body. My arched back collapsed against the bed, my body limp and trembling. He cradled me against him as the pleasure washed over me. I felt his arms tighten around me, and then he stiffened, letting out a low groan. He laid on top of me for a moment, his weight almost crushing me. He caught his breath before pulling out of me.

I started giggling, and his deep laugh joined mine.

"I thought men only last like twenty seconds."

"My name is Collin, not men."

I chuckled against his skin.

"You okay?" he croaked for the millionth time.

"I'm more than okay. We need to do that again soon."

He kissed my lips.

"You want to take a shower?" he asked and I nodded.

I winced as I stood, my muscles aching as I straightened.

His lips touched my side and I bent down to kiss him as I reached for my sheet to cover my body.

I wasn't ready to parade naked in front of him, but I was definitely going to have sex with Collin again.

## FIFTEEN

THE NEXT MORNING, I woke up alone.

I pulled on my jeans, grimacing as the rough material hit the sensitive apex between my thighs. I pulled on my shirt as I headed downstairs, where Collin was cooking breakfast.

My eyes feasted on him—he was shirtless displaying his perfect sculpted body.

He was everything a girl could ever want: tall, perfectly built, had a sexy tattoo, and he cooked. Not to mention that the sex was fucking fantastic—even if I had nothing to compare it to, I was certain nothing could top sex with Collin.

I walked over and wrapped my arms around him from behind.

“Good morning sunshine.” He glanced at his watch. “Nine o’ clock. Must be a record.”

“Shut up.” I kissed his back softly.

“How do you feel?”

“Perfect.” I nabbed a piece of bacon.

We had breakfast together and then cuddled in front of a movie.

He had heard that Theo was doing well, and so was Collin’s family.

I wanted to tell him about the Alpha, but I was scared that they would immediately pack up and leave for Egypt, leaving me just as pathetic as Liz.

My father would never let me go to Egypt with him.

We went to the nearest movie theatre that afternoon. Being out like this with Collin made me feel normal, like the girls in the books I read.

For a few hours, I wasn't a hunter of supernatural creatures. I was just Ru, wildly in love with the guy of her dreams. There was nothing was paranormal about it.

When we got home, Collin took a shower with me.

It was awkward as he stood behind me.

His hands explored my skin and then his fingers dug into me like last night.

The steam and hot water also had an effect on me as he kissed the nape of my neck.

I leaned into his body, one foot resting against the wall.

I moaned through heavy breaths. His fingers stopped and he turned me around.

My arms went to his neck and our lips crashed feverishly into each other.

His hands stroked the sides of my body down to my hips. When he reached my thigh, he tightened his grip, almost pinching me.

It felt wonderful.

He pushed me against the wall, lifting my leg and holding me in place. His lips trailed down my neck and breasts.

He lowered to his knees, placing my legs around his neck as he licked down my stomach.

"Collin, what are you doing?"

"Shh," he said as he licked over my folds before he pushed his tongue inside me.

I almost doubled over on top of him, but he pushed me back up, one hand splaying on my stomach.

I was on the edge between feeling tickled and pleasure, unsure of whether to giggle and moan.

"Don't you like it?"

"I don't know," I said.

He carried on.

I closed my eyes and focused on the sensation as my thighs clenched around his head.

I couldn't help but wonder where he'd learned this.

He was so experienced.

He placed a kiss on that sensitive bundle of nerves, then lowered my legs, checking to see if I was steady on my feet before he stepped out of the shower.

I gaped at being left there without warning.

"You better get your ass out here, Ru," he called.

I hurriedly shut off the water and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around myself as I ran after him.

He was already under the covers.

He opened them invitingly and I jumped in next to him, pulling them over us both.

He grabbed me and rolled me on top of him, slipping the towel from my body. I straddled him, sliding against his hard length that he'd already sheathed in a condom as he worshipped my body with his mouth.

He sat upright, and I crossed my legs around his back, pulling him closer. My hands tangled into his wet hair. He shifted me up an inch, then lowered me onto his shaft. I gasped as he filled me.

"You good?"

"Yeah," I breathed out, shifting my hips, adjusting to this new position. We kissed as I rocked into him, his hands clamped on my hips and guiding me gently.

We stayed like that until my thighs ached. As I slowed, he pinned me down on the bed, thrusting into me with steady strokes.

Last night was hard and fast, but this was unhurried and sweet. My heart clenched. I was in love with him.

After we'd both reached our peaks, we returned to the shower. This time, we managed to clean each other between kisses and laughter.

I dried my hair and then I snuggled into bed next to Collin, my eyes drifting close before I realized it.

I woke up, my head still groggy from sleep, when I jumped out of bed. He was frantically pulling on his pants.

"Wake up, Ru. They're back."

I frowned as I listened for the sound of the truck but I heard nothing. "Relax, it was probably—" But then lights shone through the window, barreling toward us, truck engines grumbling.

*Holy crap, his hearing is incredible.*

I jumped out of bed. Collin was already on his way out of my room.

Thank heavens we took a second shower together.

I pulled on my clothes, grinning like an idiot, then morphed my featured back into the miserable face I had to have on for when my family was around. They all believed my brother was dead and—

"Huck, no!" Collin shouted.

"You bastard!"

*Shit, shit, shit!*

Collin yelled, and there was loud sound that reverberated through the room. A gun.

Cold fear rushed over me. I sprang forward and rushed out of my room.

"Dad! Stop!" I yelled as I pulled on my sweater and hurried downstairs. I froze at the scene in our foyer. Collin was on his knees, a sheen of sweat on his forehead, groaning in agony. A spear protruded from his leg.

I grabbed at my head as I screamed at my father to stop. This wasn't right. It was just sex. My father had no right to attack Collin.

"Stay out of this, Ru!" my father yelled.

"He is one of them," Uncle Fernus added.

"One of who?" I snapped. My father was insane.

Uncle Fernus pressed the silver side of his gun barrel against Collin's neck. Collin's skin sizzled and he let out a scream that threatened to burst my eardrums.

"It's not what you think," Collin gasped out, staring at me with petrified eyes.

My heart seemed to stop, the blood turning cold.

"This is what they have been hiding from us, Ru. They are all werewolves."

"It's not what you think!" Collin faced Huck. "We're not like that."

"Don't pull that bullshit on me!" My father's voice came out in a growl.

Collin was a werewolf. I gulped past the lump in my throat.

Will stomped through the door to Collin with determined strides. His mouth curled into a sneer, he kicked Collin on the side of his head. He collapsed to the floor, eyes closed, unmoving.

"Take him to the barn." Dad snapped and Will and Fernus sprang to it.

"What about the others?" Liz's voice trembled. Her eyes were trained on Collin as Will and Fernus picked him up and carried him outside.



"Greg knows what's good for them. They are all going to die for what they did to Theo."

I had no idea what to do.

Collin was a werewolf, and my father was going to kill him.

My sister glared at me, eyes filled with loathing. "What's wrong with you? How did your precious little visions not show you that he was a werewolf? You've been spending so much time with him. How did you not realize it?"

I shook my head in disbelief.

She was also in love with Collin. Why wasn't she stopping my father?

I could finally move my legs again, and I rushed downstairs on unsteady legs.

"No, Liz. I never had a vision of Collin was a werewolf. If you'd gotten over yourself and bothered to speak to me, you'd know that. And you've spent more time with him than I have! If you didn't figure it out, how the hell was I going to?" My fists clenched at my sides. "Get the hell away from me! I need to talk to him."

She grabbed my arm and pulled me back with all her strength. "Ru, they don't give a shit about humans. They kill us, for fuck's sake!"

I shook my head. Collin had shared a great deal with me.

How had he fooled us the night he came over for dinner? The cutlery had been pure silver, but he'd been fine. Why had his skin burned from Uncle Fernus's gun?

I pulled my arm out of her grasp and ran out the door.

"Dad!" Liz yelled.

He shook his head. "She needs to see it, Liz."

I burst into the barn. Collin was passed out, on his knees. Will clasped silver shackles around his wrists, and my eyes followed the

chain, which led up to the highest beam of the barn.

His skin was sizzling under the silver, making my stomach turn.

I wanted to scream, to tell them to stop. But I couldn't.

How had I not known he was a werewolf? Why hadn't he told me? I'd thought what we had was real, was special, but it wasn't.

I didn't know whether to be angry or sad.

"How did you find out?" I asked, turning around to face my father.

"Emily figured it out. She had the same feeling we had. Tonight she tested out her theory. At dinner, she pretended to accidentally poke Greg with her fork. His skin sizzled instantly. Greg jumped up, but a second too late. We all heard it, Ru. We sprang into action. I shot Tommy in the leg, and the silver bullet burned a whole right through him." My father's face contorted in fury as he aimed a kick at Collin's midsection, then spit on him. "Greg narrowly escaped the shot Fernus fired, but it scraped his arm, and he burned again." His upper lip curled into a snarl. "Then everything was out in the open. Greg grabbed a vial and emptied it into his mouth, and he exploded into a wolf. We retreated and then the real hunt started. But I came straight here. I couldn't leave you alone in the house with this fucker." He kicked Collin again and I had to clench my jaw to keep myself from telling my father to stop.

Collin was coming to. He screamed in agony at the silver, but quickly got it under control when he realized where he was.

*Think, Ru. Fucking think.*

"Why did you lie to me?" I shouted at him.

"I'm sorry, Ru. We had no choice," he said through raspy breaths.

"Stop talking to her." Will punched his jaw. I wanted to tell him to stop doing that, but I didn't. It wasn't how hunters acted. Hunters

were trained to kill the monsters, not screw them or fall in love with them.

Collin laughed, low and breathlessly. "All this time I've been trying to tell you that not all wolves are bad, but you didn't fucking listen to me. I'm not a monster. My pack protects humans." His tone changed from incredulous to defeated. "And you call me the monster? You hunters love the kill more than we do." He said in disgust.

"I said stop fucking talking to her." Will punched Collin square in the nose.

Blood spattered everywhere, tiny droplets falling on my sweater. I looked down at the drops staining my front, the reality finally sinking in.

Collin was going to die—my family was going to kill him—and there was nothing I could do.

Collin's breath was coming out in low, controlled rasps, as if he had gone through this a million times before. He looked up at me, his eyes pleading and bloodshot.

"Ru, please. You know me." His voice was low, raspy.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. "Your family... are they real, Collin? Or another lie?" I asked, my mind wandering to Theo.

Collin hung his head, he's eyes focused on the ground in front of him, but he didn't say a word

"Where is my brother, Collin?"

"What?" my dad croaked Everyone turned to stare at me.

I crouched down in front of Collin, putting my face close to his. "Tell me where Theo is!"

Collin's eyes tracked over my face. "Ru, I promise you, Theo is safe."

"Where the fuck is he?" my voice rose an octave with my panic.

"Theo's... alive?" my father asked in a broken voice.

"No, Dad. He's not alive. He's one of them." The words felt harsh as they passed my lips.

My dad's eyes widened, and he shook his head. "What? No. No. That's impossible."

I softened my voice and set a hand on my father's shoulder. "It's not. His birthmark... Daddy, it's the mark of the wolves. That's how they knew they could change him. They wanted more wolves, so they took him"

"That wasn't my pack, I swear," Collin said through gritted teeth.

"Do you honestly expect me to believe you? I gave you everything!"

"What?" my father roared and whirled on Collin, kicking him in his stomach.

"I'm so sorry," Collin mouthed.

I heard Collin's bone shattering as my father aimed kick after kick at his body. I focused on a spot high against the wall my jaw clenched.

I couldn't watch this, I couldn't hear this.

Collin had lied to me about everything.

I spun on my heel and strode out of the barn.

My sister glared at me as I passed.

Fuck off, I thought.

Collin's defeated voice reached my ears. "Ru, please. I'm the one."

I pinned him with a disdainful glare.

"It wasn't all lies. I'm the one," he said.

"What one?"

Will yelled. "I said—"

"Will." My voice was low but commanding, and Will shut his mouth immediately. I'd never taken that tone with anyone.

I looked back at Collin.

"If you kill me, you will have another massacre on your hands. The wolves will all go insane again," he rasped out.

"Oh, what bullshit is this?" Liz asked.

I ignored her. Pinning Collin with a glare, I said, "I don't believe you." Then I spun around again and stormed out of the barn.

The second I stepped my foot out of the barn, Collin spoke again. "Ru, please. The lockpass."

I stopped, but I refused to turn and look at him.

"The tattoo. It only appeared the night I saved your life."

He had told me about that. How there was one true mate for each wolf.

Fuck.

I was his.

I shook my head and walked away.

"Ru, please!" he yelled, but whatever he was going to say was cut off with his scream.

I ran in and upstairs to my room and slammed the door behind me, but it didn't do anything to drown out his screams.

I noticed his bag in the corner of my room, and I went over to it.

In one of the compartments, I found three vials.

Two of them had Ravain stamped on it in small cursive letters, another said Stra-vain

I put the vials inside my hoody, and shut myself in my bathroom, his screams echoing through the night.

His wolves had abandoned him.

Tears rolled down my face. I leaned my head against the door as I sank to the floor. And somehow, I must have fallen asleep, because I

jolted awake.

It was quiet when I opened the door.

I stopped and listened, but there wasn't even a whisper. I tiptoed over to the window, but I couldn't see the barn from here.

The night air was silent.

Was he dead?

I didn't want him to be dead.

I couldn't show my family how I felt about Collin, because Collin was right. Hunters were the monsters. Werewolves weren't.

When I was certain everyone was asleep, I climbed out my window and shimmied down the drainpipe.

Walking through the house made too much noise for me to sneak out that way. And my family would be sleeping lightly tonight.

I ran to the barn, where I found Collin barely breathing.

The flesh of his wrists was charred and puckered. My stomach turned.

My family had beaten him to a pulp.

I cupped his face, then lightly slapped his cheek "Collin," I whispered.

I slapped him harder. "Collin?"

He stirred. "Ru?" he asked tiredly.

"I'm so sorry. You should've told me." I grabbed a hair pin and pushed it into one shackle, twisting and turning it until it clicked. I pulled it off his wrist and rubbed the skin.

His arm flopped like a rag doll's.

"What are you doing?"

"Saving your life. Now shut up." I pushed the pin into the other shackle. I could feel his gaze on me. Tears pricked my eyes.

"I didn't lie about everything."

"It doesn't matter anymore," I murmured.

"Your brother is safe with Greg."

"Shh, none of that matters." My tears fell as I worked on the shackle.

"The other wolves. They didn't die. We begged them to accept me—"

"Collin, please. Shut up."

"Need to find the Alpha," he drew out.

"Why is he so important?"

"He can link the minds of all the wolves," he said through heavy breaths. "They won't need to give up their rank to receive my gift."

"You're really the one?"

With effort, he nodded. "I'm sorry that I lied to you about my family. I had no choice."

"Theo will never be human again, will he?"

He shook his head.

"Why did you lie to me?"

"I only ever lied about my family and why we needed the Alpha." He looked at me with one good eye. "The rest was all true. You are my true mate. I won't survive without you."

"I don't want to hear it."

"I will never find another. I love you with all my heart."

"Stop talking," I hissed.

"Come with me, please."

Finally, the shackle sprang open in my hand. "You're out of your mind."

"Ru, you'll die if you don't change."

"I'm not wolf material. I wasn't raised to be."

"But you were made for it."

"I can't. I'm sorry. Go. Please. You won't get another chance." I grabbed the vials from my pocket. "Which one is it?" I asked and he

looked down at my hands.

He didn't speak.

"Collin... which one?"

He nodded to the darker one. Ravain.

I opened it and handed it to him.

"You need your strength. Just go."

"What will you tell your family?"

"That the wolves came to rescue you," I said as I pressed the vial into his hand.

"I don't think so," Liz's voice came from behind me.

She stood in the doorway. Panic roiled inside me.

"Go! Now!" I yelled, and he downed the vial.

"You little traitor," Liz spat at me.

"You don't know all the facts!" I moved in front of Collin, shielding him from her as she walked forward.

"He's a fucking werewolf! He probably changed our brother," Liz snarled.

I grabbed at her arms and tried to reason with her. "He was with me the night Theo was changed, Liz! He couldn't have done it."

"You are in way over your head, little sis. Do you really think he loves you?"

Collin was still behind me.

"What are waiting for? Go!" I yelled at Collin and he drained the other vial as well.

He groaned at the start of the shift. It must have been painful as fuck.

Liz and I both watched as inhuman sounds came from his mouth.

"What did you give him, Ru?"

I looked back at her in a panic. "You need to run, Liz."

For once, she listened to me, streaking out of the barn in a flash.



A beast stood where Collin had been.

"Please, go. Liz will come back with reinforcements. Please."

He walked toward me, his tubes rattling. My heart pounded erratically. I had no idea if his mind was still his

He stopped. "I will find you," he said in English. "I promise. I'll see you soon."

He left through the window.

He hadn't harmed me. He truly wasn't like them.

"Collin, wait!" I yelled after him and ran out into the forest. He would find me. He would.

From the house, I heard my family's shouts.

I ran deeper into the forest.

"Collin, please," I begged in a whisper.

"What is it?"

I jumped, startled. I turned and watched as he slowly approached me, his tubes still and silent.

Fuck, he was huge. Bigger than any of the wolves we'd ever hunted.

He waited me out.

"I saw your Alpha. He's in Egypt. The place is torn down. In a forest. I don't know where. But the floor gives in and his tomb is right underneath. He's asleep there."

He stepped closer, and I backed away, trembling more with each step I took. But then I was against a tree, with nowhere to go.

The only time I had ever been this close to a wolf was when it was about to die.

"I love you, Ru." He disappeared in a blur.

## SIXTEEN

WEEKS PASSED, and I struggled to piece my heart back together.

My dad was furious with me. My uncle refused to acknowledge my existence, and Will and Liz treated me like shit.

But I didn't give a fuck.

I spent most of my time in my room; the message that I was unwelcome on the farm was clear.

My family still hunted. One thing they'd learned from Greg's pack—or Collin's, I wasn't sure now anymore—was that working together as a team got more wolves killed.

They were on a warpath, wanting to slaughter every last wolf. They were the bloodthirsty monsters now.

I'd given up my weapons.

There was no way in hell that I could kill a werewolf now.

The only way to get through to my family was Theo.

He'd hated the wolves and lived for the kill as much as they did. He could make them understand the truth.

One morning, I found a letter beside my bed.

I closed my eyes. Collin had been here.

I took the letter from my nightstand and smelled his scent on it.

I missed him constantly. I felt like I would never be happy without him.

I opened the letter.

*My Ru.*

*I cannot tell you how sorry I am about everything. I wish I could have told you before what I was and why I wanted to find the Alpha.*

*I'd lied about us wanting to kill him. We need to find him to align all wolves again, so we can fulfill our purpose like we used to.*

*We were never monsters. If you don't believe me, I left a book for you in the library. Row G, the third book of the twenty-first marker.*

*It has no title. It carries our entire history. Please keep it safe until we meet again.*

*I hope you will have forgiven me by then, because I didn't lie when I told you that I cannot survive without you.*

*I only hope you are safe, and that your dad isn't too angry with you.*

*Your safety is more important to me than my life.*

*I wrote this letter to answer some of your questions.*

*Theo is safe. I would never let any harm come to him. He survived the change, as did others who bore the mark.*

*The lockpass... what I said that day... it's all true. It's beautiful, but it's also a curse.*

*If you die, a large part of me will die too.*

*Please, for me, keep yourself out of harm's way.*

*I will find you when the right time comes. I promise.*

*Being a wolf is a noble sacrifice. I was scared when they first found me. I didn't want it. But when Tony and Greg told me the truth of who I was. He gave me the book I'm leaving you, and it opened my eyes to what I had to do. I hope it does the same for you.*

*My pack had been keeping an eye on you long before we ever met. We saw what you could do. The younger the seer is, the more she can see. Our she-wolves cannot see him. We sought out new seers, even they couldn't see him.*

*We found you during a hunt and have been watching you ever since.*

*I'm sorry about the trickery. I didn't know who you were to me until it was too late. I had no choice but to continue lying.*

*The day your father tested me with the cutlery, I was prepared. Greg and I knew he would test me, but we needed you to find the Alpha.*

*There is a substance called Homeofolio. It's like a protective glove that human eyes cannot see.*

*It shielded my hands from the silver. I was happy it was enough, but we were wrong to trust hunters.*

*It wasn't easy. Believe me. But I know there is good in you, plenty of it too.*

*In your vision of the Great War, you spoke about a breed of monsters that looked almost human. They are a shifter race. They can take on the appearance of another, but since their bodies appear human, no one detected that they were supernatural.*

*They filled in for us during the full moons. The doctor at the hospital, he was also a shifter. Many hospitals and police departments have them as our worlds are not so different from one another.*

*You must be able to look past the armor to see who is a monster and who isn't.*

*I lied about being out of commission. In fact, I was healed before I left the hospital. But that is the bitch about pretending. It always comes and bites you in the ass.*

*I didn't know how it would turn out if I confessed. You look after your family. I do too, and my family has a hundred more members than yours. I'm sorry I lied to you. I will spend forever earning your trust back. Because not everything was a lie. What was between us wasn't a lie. What I still feel for you now, is not a lie.*

*The tattoo on my back is your life's markings and it will always protect me. I wish I could do the same for you.*

*Thank you for telling me where our Alpha is. I hope in due time that you will come to see that we are not evil creatures.*

*We were placed on this earth to only hunt those that fed off you. But the curse changed it all.*

*I will love you forever, Ru, even if you don't love me. I will always watch over you.*

*Stay safe and know I'm always near.*

*Love*

*Wolfboy*

I smiled at his signature as tears filled my eyes.

I was still so conflicted.

I'd betrayed my family by setting him free, but I would never be able to live in a world in which Collin didn't exist.

I could never forgive myself if anything happened to him.

I fell back into my chair. I wouldn't be able to get that book because my father had grounded me. I had no one to get it for me either. Everyone I trusted, hated me.

A headache came on and I stumbled over to my bed. It was so strong. I hadn't had one in such a long time and the dizziness made me clasp my sheets.

The room spun as the pull came.

I was standing in a forest.

I didn't feel like myself.

Trees surrounded me.

I looked to my left. Collin stood next to me in his wolf form. "If this goes south, please take Remi and Martin and get the hell out of here."

"What?" I asked.

"Ru, we talked about this."

Who the hell were Remi and Martin?

"I'm not leaving Dad," a stubborn voice said.

"We didn't come to fight. You will do as I say."

He whined.

Dad?

Where I should have seen feet, I instead saw two paws with tubes all around them.

This was the Great War and I was fighting alongside Collin. I'd forgiven him.

I was a wolf. I became one to be with him.

I opened my eyes and I was back in my room.

He would find me, one day, and I would forgive him.

COLLIN

"ARE you sure this was where she said he is?"

"Yeah, dead sure," I answered.

Greg and a few others had managed to get away from the hunters. They'd found me near the edge of the forest.

I told them the truth, that Ru had set me free. They were worried about her, and a small group of wolves unknown to the

hunters were watching from a distance, ready to step in if her life was in danger.

They checked in from time to time, giving me updates on how she was doing.

None of it sounded good.

She stayed in her room day in and day out.

But I was certain Huck would forgive her for what she did.

He'd see that what he was doing had to change. There would come a time where one of us would save them. Rumors would spread.

I missed Ru every day and could only hope she would forgive me.

We found the derelict structure in the forest.

It was where Heiko used to live as a human.

We searched this place so many times, and all along, he had been right under our feet.

A lot of us gathered at this spot tonight.

Greg and I walked in first. Ru had said that the floor would cave in and we jumped like idiots on the foundation.

It was solid.

Then it caved in under Greg.

"You okay?" I rushed to the hole and Greg laughed.

"Whoa, she really did see it all, Collin. I lost my flashlight. I can't see a damn—" Something clattered and he cursed.

"We found it!" I yelled to the others and jumped in as I switched on my flashlight."

The light illuminated a few feet ahead of me, and I spotted Greg.

He was grinning, standing next to one of those old oil tables.

I took out my zippo and lit the oil.

It set aflame, and the fire ran the length of the room, hitting intersections and spreading.

More wolves jumped through the hole.

We stared at Heiko's riches that had been buried here with him. Gasps sounded around me.

Greg laughed.

He and two other wolves were part of the original group that ran with Heiko but split up when the blood moon all changed them. Greg had no idea what happened to Heiko afterward or where they lay him to rest.

Heiko trusted them. They would be the ones to explain to Heiko what had happened.

The fire finally lit a table at the end, revealing the sarcophagus.

Heiko.

We all ran toward it, stepping carefully.

We struggled to push it open. Finally, it shifted.

Inside was a beast of a man—once a prince who had given up his human existence to avenge the woman he loved.

From this act, we all got the mark. To find true love, like the one lost when vampires attacked his village.

"Collin," Amy said. "Touch him. We all need to link together. You will draw our strength and your link with him will wake him."

"You sure?"

She nodded. "I've seen it."

"Here goes nothing."

I reached out and touched his body. He was cold.

One by one, every wolf touched me. At first nothing happened, and I doubted Amy.

Then I felt it. A soft hum vibrated through my body.



It grew stronger until it reached a height I didn't think I could contain.

Something like an explosion rocked through me, and we all collapsed as the link broke.

Someone at the back laughed, then more laughter came, running through the tomb like wildfire.

"Rise, young man." The command was issued by a deep voice.

"My king," Greg said, as my strength slowly began to return.

"We found him, Collin. We did it."

"How long was I asleep, Gregory?" Heiko said.

"A long time, my lord."

"Where is he?"

"He's the idiot whose strength needs to come back."

Laughter rippled through my companions.

A large hand grabbed me and pulled me to my feet.

"I've waited a long time for you. Are you ready to fulfill your destiny?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." I smiled tiredly

The king, our Alpha, smiled back.

RU

IT HAD BEEN three years since I betrayed my family. They'd never gotten over what I had done.

I hadn't seen Collin again, but I believed he was still out there. My body was starting to show the signs that Collin told me about. It first came in the form of nosebleeds and now, I coughed blood from time to time.

It was a slow bettering but would take my life eventually if I didn't take the transformation to become a werewolf.

We were hunting again. My father refused to believe the rumors from the vampire hunters.

They claimed that werewolves had saved their lives during hunts, jumping into the battle and shredding the vampires to pieces.

It happened more and more.

The SHA had no idea how to handle that information. The vampire hunters believed completely that werewolves weren't dangerous anymore.

But my father couldn't fathom it. He wanted all of them to die, even my brother.

My sister finally fell in love again, this time with another hunter. She was trying to get a transfer to his department—witch hunting—but it was almost impossible. But nothing was impossible for Liz.

I'd finally gained control over my sight. I mainly saw the war, and every time, I wondered where my wolf was.

I couldn't see him or hear him.

He wasn't among those who tried to negotiate. Of that I was certain. He was so large, I was sure he'd stand out of the crowd.

I wondered if I was at his side, but I hadn't gotten another vision of us and our boys.

We were preparing for a hunt.

We met up with a group of vampire hunters because the SHA wanted us to learn from them.

I was scared to death. Vampires were extremely fast, and we weren't in familiar territory—we weren't even on American soil anymore.

My father had done everything in his power to keep Collin from finding me.

I told myself that the vampires were almost extinct. I had to believe the Great War would never happen.

The visions didn't come during hunts. Lately, I got one or two a month. And the headaches weren't as bad as they used to be.

"Ru, get your head in the game."

"Yeah. Remember why we're here."

"I'm still a wolf hunter," my father said.

"We don't kill the wolves. They help us." The leader interrupted my father.

My lips lifted, but I covered my mouth with my hand so my father couldn't see it.

Uncle Fernus and Will still hunted with us, but Liz was busy training for her transfer.

She truly excelled at everything.

I wished Theo would appear and change Dad's mind, but he wasn't here. He was far away with Collin.

I sighed.

I would never see him again.

He was supernatural, not all-knowing.

Every day, I wondered about him. Wondered whether he still looked the same.

I never found another love.

Maybe the lockpass worked both ways.

I wasn't sure if I could ever forgive Collin, but anything would be better than living with the person my father had become.

Even Liz couldn't stand it anymore.

Being this close to a vampire coven gave me the creeps.

I could feel them watching us in the woods, and my hands trembled. The vampire hunters were good, but my family and I were used to werewolves.

*Please be out there. You promised.*

I kissed the necklace I had found in the book Collin left me. I still had it with me, in a safe place where my father would never find it. He'd burn it if he did.

"Ru!" my father yelled.

Three UV Nitro bullets hit the vampire as she pinned me down, almost crushing my arm.

The bullets didn't do shit. I was in over my head.

The entire coven jumped on us. We were all going to die.

I wrestled her as she tried to feed on me.

I could think of nothing but Collin.

Her weight vanished so suddenly, for a millisecond I fought with the empty air. I pushed myself up with my good arm and looked around.

"Was that a wolf?" I shouted. The vampires and wolves were a mixed blur.

Rattling reverberated between the trees.

My heart wanted to leap, but I stamped it down where it belonged. These were Belgian wolves, not my American ones.

My dad picked up his gun and aimed when Yuri hit it out of his hand. He slammed my dad on his ass, aiming his gun at him.

"Please, Yuri."

"I'm going to speak to Rudy. You do not belong in the hunt. If you can't respect my rules, you can't be here. We have an alliance with the wolves." He emptied my father's gun of all bullets and threw it on the ground next to him.

I looked at my father in distaste.

The rattling stopped, and the evening became quiet again.

If I could just speak to one of them, maybe he could get word to Collin. Tell him where I was.

I stood and cradled my shattered arm against my chest.

It was painful, but nothing I wasn't used to.

"You okay?" Sandra asked and I nodded.

"Ouch." She gestured to my arm. "That cannot be good."

"I'll live." I said through clenched teeth.

"You do not feel the pain?"

"I welcome the pain. It keeps me human," I said that last part to my father.

He got up from the ground and stalked over to his Jeep.

"Let him go. He's no use to us."

I huffed. "None of us are any use to you."

"Nonsense. Rumor has it that the wolves are trying to make amends with the werewolf hunters. They keep asking for them, where they are, where they live."

I couldn't help but wonder if it had anything to do with Collin.

A wolf strode out of the woods.

He was big, but not as huge as Collin. He said something in Dutch and Sandra bowed her head.

She pushed me down.

Yuri and all the other vampire hunters bowed to the wolf.

He walked toward me. My heart still beat like a hummingbird's wings whenever they came near me.

He said something else and Sandra answered.

"Where did you get that necklace?" he asked me in English.

"It was given to me."

"By whom?"

"None of your business," I said.

"Ah, the famous Ru."

Laughing, Sandra said something in Dutch.

He answered her, then turned to me.

"We'll meet again, Ru," he said as he left.

"You're that Ru?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've heard that they are looking for one hunter specifically. They always ask the same question. I never thought it was you."

"They're looking for me?" Collin!

I beamed. I felt lighter than I had in years. He was looking for me.

I HAD to stay out of the hunt for a month while my arm healed.

I was no use to the vampire hunters either.

How was he going to find me now?

It was clear the wolves weren't deranged. They must have found the Alpha.

Another month passed and I was back in the training facility. Becoming faster, stronger.

Time was ticking by and my hope of seeing Collin was dwindling.

As I approached my twenty-second birthday, a messenger came with my clearance and a letter from my father.

I wasn't ready to read the letter from my father, not yet.

I took my clearance and left with the group I had been assigned to.

My sister finally got her transfer. She broke a few class records during the process.

Unfortunately, we could never rebuild our relationship. We greeted each other in the hallways but that was all. Some of these people didn't even know we were sisters.

My group was set to leave and I grabbed the last Jeep.

Will was also hunting with another group. I think a part of him saw the truth behind the wolves, because he didn't reach for the

silver anymore.

Uncle Fernus had been deported with my father. They'd both lost their licenses to hunt, and if they hunted supernaturals again, they would be sentenced to death. I hoped it would never come to that.

My life was sort of over. Without my wolf or my family, I had nothing to live for.

Yuri had revealed that the wolves were now the hunters and the hunters were the bait. We arrived at our mission. People had been disappearing from this area. There was something nearby. A supernatural entity.

The leader got off the phone and I hoped it was a pack nearby.

We were sent here to do our part. To be fast food.

I still got the jitters. It didn't matter how hard I trained, I would never be fast enough, strong enough to kill these creatures.

I kept my gun close.

It was silent. Not a cricket chirping. All signs that there was something here that shouldn't be.

I was alone, my group nowhere to be seen.

How had I gotten lost?

I panicked. The first rule was to never be alone.

I looked around me, my mind spinning like it used to when I got a vision and then I fired.

I hit one, but another hit me so hard my head spun when I fell to the ground.

I tried not to lose my consciousness, but it was nearly impossible.

He ran toward me in a blur, and as I closed my eyes, accepting my fate, a huge wolf jumped out between the trees.

The wolf ripped the vampire to shreds.

I blacked out.

WHEN I CAME TO, I was lying in a bed.

It wasn't the SHA quarters in Belgium.

Too fancy. My head was still spinning and I had to close my eyes.

When the door swished, I opened them to see Theo framed in the threshold.

Tears sprang into my eyes.

"Hello, sis."

"Theo," I whispered. "You saved my ass."

He shook his head. "Vampires? Really? Are you trying to give him a heart attack?"

Was he talking about Collin? My brother sat on the edge of my bed. "He's here?" I asked.

"He had to leave, but yeah, he was constantly next to your bed."

"He saw me?"

"Ru, he saved your life. When the Belgian pack called claiming to have found an arrogant werewolf hunter hunting vampires, who was in possession of the necklace, we came as fast as we could. Heiko doesn't like him being away from the main pack for long, but he had no choice to let him go this time."

"Heiko?"

"The Alpha."

My eyes widened. "He found him?"

"Three years ago. I was still struggling to accept everything. I'm sorry to hear about Dad."

"Yeah. My betrayal didn't do him good either."

"You didn't betray him. Collin is a good guy, Ru. He still thinks that you are mad at him, but he thinks you wearing the necklace is a good sign."

I chuckled. "Where am I?"



"Behind enemy lines." My brother wiggled his eyebrows and spoke in a mock-spooky voice.

I giggled. He seemed different. In a good way.

"I take it you've made peace with this life."

"It's not so bad. Once I learned the value and true meaning of it, it felt as if I belonged."

"I'm happy."

"How're the visions?"

"They come and go."

"You have a handle on them yet?"

I nodded. I didn't tell him about the nose bleeds or coughing up blood whenever I get the flu.

"What do you see?"

"Nothing linked to the hunts anymore or finding your Alpha."

His jaw dropped. "Are you telling me you have visions of the war?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, and I still see three different versions."

"Visions of the fucking war." He shook his head in disbelief.

"Why do you say it like it's an abomination?"

"No." He smiled. "The opposite. Not one she-wolf I've met sees the war, Ru?"

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

"Heiko is going to love you."

"I doubt that. I see the wolves lose time and time again. If they decide to fight, they can't win."

"Who is they?"

"I don't know. The story of my life."

We heard someone running toward the room, and Theo looked over his shoulder.

My eyes fell on Collin.

He froze in the doorway, his eyes locked on mine.

"I should leave you two alone." Theo got up, kissed me on top of my head and walked past Collin.

"I thought you gave up hunting?"

I gave him a half shrug. "I don't kill wolves anymore."

"Vampires, Ru? Give me a fucking heart attack. What if one changed you?"

"Three years, Collin?"

He stepped closer. "I tried to find you. It wasn't easy."

"Yeah I know. My father was determined."

I looked away as he came and sat on the bed.

"You're still mad, aren't you?"

"I don't know what I'm mad about. Your lying to me... or taking so fucking long to find me." My voice broke and then my arms wrapped around his neck.

He buried his face in the nape of my neck, inhaling my scent and holding me tight. A warm glow of happiness spread through my body.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

I chuckled. "I told you before. I knew I'd never be happy without you. I've been miserable for over three years."

"Sorry," he said teasingly. "I was held up trying to find a little arrogant wolf hunter." He winked at me.

"You're a crappy tracker, mister."

"I never said I was good. I have other qualities."

I smiled.

"Which reminds me: you'll be meeting the Alpha soon."

"Oh, really? I'm honored."

He chuckled.

I studied him. I'd missed his face. "How long did it take you to find him?"

"Your directions weren't all that great, but thankfully Greg is a much better tracker than me."

"You found Greg?"

"They found me."

"I'm sorry about all that. I was confused."

"It wasn't like I made it easy." He paused. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Can I kiss you? Please?"

I giggled. "You're locked on me." It was what the book called it.

"Don't punish me. I spent a long time searching for you."

I leaned closer to him and then our lips finally touched after three long years.

I couldn't help thinking how screwed up my bloodline got.

Eva killed her grandmother because she became a wolf. Her descendants became wolves because of her bloodline.

Little Red Riding Hood would never be the same.

THE END

*If you plan to continue with the Guardian of Monsters series by Kristin Ping,(who gave me permission to write Forbidden using her world), there's an epilogue...but I suggest you stop here if you don't like cliffhangers and don't plan to continue.*

*Thanks for reading!*

# THE STORY CONTINUES...

Immortal

By Kristin Ping

Natasha's life begins the night she is turned. With the ability to channel fire, a gift that only belongs to the witches, she becomes a terror— not only to the packs, but all the supernatural breeds.

She's known as Blaze. The deadliest vampire out there.

But Blaze has a secret. She didn't want to become a vampire, she needed to become a vampire, and her reasoning is lost. It died the night her human life did. Her conscience activates when two varcolacs visit the covenant, looking for allies for the Great War.

What was it about the Varcolacs that made her grow a conscience? And will she be able to outrun it to keep the title of terror?

# NATASHA

2058 - PRESENT

I shifted uselessly against my bonds and gasped as the metal dug into my skin. The chains and heavy locks that shackled my arms and legs to the stiff chair beneath me were made of UVS metal, among the strongest and deadliest metals to our kind. It weakened us so badly that we didn't even have the strength of a mere human.

I winced at the pain throbbing in my neck. *Werewolf bite.*

It was a known fact that vampires did not live long, seven days at most, when bitten by a werewolf. Nobody here would suck out the venom, and no one was coming to my rescue.

Tonight's events played through my mind in vivid detail.

Cass had let me go. After so many years, she finally let me go. But when I saw Vladimire and Francine, I knew it had all been a lie.

Alex and Leigh never stood a chance. Varcolacs were no match for werewolves. They weren't as strong and their bodies couldn't hold the Stra-vain—a concentrated dose of a rare plant that allowed werewolves to transform at will—in their system. Varcolacs had to wait for the full moon.

A few nights ago, when I was camping under the moonlight with Alex and Leigh, I'd thought I was the luckiest vampire in history. I had been given a second chance at life. An opportunity to make something good come from evil.

But that second night, when Alex smelled wolves on our tail, I knew it was just one of Cass's cruel games.

She'd lied when she told me I could be with Alex, that she knew what it felt like to be in love with a Varcolac. She'd never intended to allow me to leave—not her precious Firebird, Natasha.

But never in a million years had I thought she would send my werewolf children to drag me back home.

What had she been thinking? That I wouldn't kill them? Or harm them?

When they attacked, I took on Vladimire first. Vladimire, who was like a son to me. I still remembered the day I went to pick him up, or really the day I stole him and his twin sister, Francine.

There in the woods, at first, I couldn't find it in myself to kill him. I tried to scare him with my fire. That hadn't made him back off, and he'd taunted me, telling me I didn't have it in me to burn him alive. He was wrong.

Francine had attacked Leigh, and Alex had tried to help. His foot triggered a bear trap, but he still fought as hard as he could. Leigh and Alex tried their best to kill Francine.

I aimed my merciless fire at Vladimire, my Vladimire. Watching him die by my hands ripped my heart to shreds, but I knew it was either us or them.

When he was a charred corpse, I steeled myself to attack Francine next. Killing her should be easier than Vladimire—she was the more sadistic of the two.

But then a werewolf pack came out of nowhere.

Since the One was found and bitten, since the discovery that Stra-vain was the opposite of Wolfsbane, werewolves had become vampires' worst nightmare again. They no longer needed the full

moon to change and hunt us down. They could do it anytime they wanted.

Many covens had been destroyed that way.

As I turned my flame upon the newcomers, a she-wolf sprang forward and bit me. Poison flowed through my system and weakened me instantaneously; my fire, the flames I had trusted for such a long time, flickered and burned out. Hatred flickered in the eyes of the creatures who encircled me; the entire pack knew who and what I was—the thorn in their hides.

Alex and Leigh's agonized screams filled the air, and I knew their screams would stay with me until the day I died. My heart shattered when I saw Leigh lying close to a tree, her eyes open and lifeless, a bloody chunk ripped from her neck. Alex was nowhere to be seen.

The werewolf pack had immediately recognized Alex and Leigh for what they were—Varcolacs. Werewolves saw Varcolacs as abominations, as somewhere in the past a werewolf and a vampire had found a way not just to make it work, but to truly love one another.

The pack's Alpha arrived, and with a barked command, he ended the battle. He knew who I was and he had orders. I was another wolf's to deal with. He and his pack were only there to bring me in alive. He shouldered his way through his pack and roughly threw me over his shoulder.

That was when I saw Alex.

The lower part of his body was detached from his torso. My heart clenched. I wanted to scream my pain into the night, wanted my flame to incinerate the whole pack of werewolves... but I was too weak from the bite. I couldn't even lift my head.

And that was how I came to be here, tied to this chair, waiting for Salvator.

I sighed.

I'd never been this tired before. I'd never felt so... I blew out a gust of air. I couldn't even put words to what I felt.

My dusty blonde hair covered my face and I tried to muster another gush of breath to blow the loose strands from my eyes.

I should hate the werewolves as much as they hated me. They attacked me when I was human and left me for dead. That was when Cassandra had found me and changed me out of the goodness of her heart. Or so the story went. I actually had no idea if that was the truth, because I had no memory of my life before becoming a vampire

Cassandra's beautiful face appeared in my mind's eye. Her face was borderline angelic. I was pretty certain she had some Hispanic heritage from the slant of her eyes, but with her skin as pale as it was, I couldn't be sure. She had dark hair and crimson eyes—all vampires' eyes changed. Some of us had bright crimson eyes. Others, like me, had translucently pale eyes—demon eyes, as some called them. But that transformation only happened if we stopped feeding off humans.

I loved Cassandra with all my heart. For a long time, she was all I wanted, and making her happy was my sole purpose. No matter how cruel or gory the task was, I always went through with it, because I never wanted to disappoint her.

The idea to build a werewolf army was something Cassandra and I had hatched. We'd stolen dozens of pups from the werewolf lairs, and all of them—except Bibi, Babilon, Vladimire, and Francine—had died. Now, Francine had returned to her own kind, gone feral, so to speak.

Did I love Cassandra now?

Honestly, I couldn't say. I had no idea what to feel.



Alex hadn't just changed how I felt about Cassandra. He'd become my everything. When they'd formed an alliance with our coven, I'd been at a breaking point. I had lost my will to live.

But there was just something about Alex and his sister, Leigh. They'd both intrigued Cassandra, too, probably because her first love had been a Varcolac.

The Varcolac she'd loved had been named Jericho. Whenever Cassandra thought I wasn't near, she cried for him. But he'd almost destroyed her, almost killed her.

Why, I had no idea.

All I knew was that Cass used to be a witch. She used to have a coven filled with misfits. Vampires, shifters, djinns, Varcolacs. Somehow, she made it work. Whether she employed magic or connections or charisma or all of the above, I didn't know; Cassandra rarely spoke about that part of her life.

But she'd made it possible for all of them to find a common ground. To exist in relative peace.

Then Jericho turned on her. Nobody talked about it, so I didn't know how or why he'd almost killed her.

Steven had been the one to change her into a vampire.

After her change, the witches abandoned her, but she continued brewing potions—potions for the wolves so they didn't become stark raving mad during the full moon and have to be locked up; potions that helped the wolves transform at will, like Stra-vain.

It wasn't just Cassandra's potions that were potent; she was. That was the thing I loved about her. She was invincible—just the right match for a vampire with the fire. Neither of us was a simpering damsel in distress. Two vampire women united by sheer power and passionate love for one another. I'd thought we'd last forever.

But she had built impenetrable walls inside herself the day Jericho almost destroyed her. On the days she was cold and distant to me, it felt like he had destroyed her, but I hadn't known her before my change, so this was only a guess.

I sighed, pushing her to the back of my mind.

Dizziness made my eyes swim as I looked at the UVS locks on my ankles and wrists. There was no way I would get out of this one. I knew they would kill me because of who I was... and send my remains back to Cassandra in a box.

Logically, I should have been quaking with fear, but a part of me was glad my life was finally over.

Alex was supposed to be my new beginning. I was going to live with him and his pack. They were technically waiting for us right now, to migrate for the next seventy years somewhere in Eastern Europe.

And now, he was gone. Leigh was gone. No new beginning waited for me. Monsters didn't get second chances, and I was one of the worst.

Perhaps it wasn't so bad that I was finally going to die. Until I'd met Alex, I'd wanted to die for such a long time, so in a way, I was already dead.

If I died, the world would be rid of one terror, and as a bonus, it would spite Cassandra.

Her plan to drag me back had backfired.

I wish I could see the look on her face when she discovered I had perished in the process, that her werewolf twins had betrayed her, and that Francine had defected.

*Talk about cutting your nose off to spite your face.* The consequences were severe. I was going to pay with my life. Again, I

shifted in my shackles, looking around the rundown shed where I was being held prisoner. Where I awaited my imminent death.

I had celebrated my twenty-second birthday almost fifty times. Most humans would wonder why I was complaining, because the whole being-young-forever thing seems so appealing, but if they knew my entire story, they'd realize why I despised this life I'd chosen to live. A life that, according to Steven, I had wanted desperately. Had begged for as I lay dying.

No one knew why I had so desperately wanted to become a vampire. Apparently, my former self was extremely secretive and never revealed the reasoning behind the insatiable desire for this path. Everyone said the same thing: that I just insisted that becoming a vampire was the only way. The question was... the only way for what?

Maybe if I recapped everything in my head, I could make sense of how I got here. Best to start from the beginning, the day I woke up and nothing mattered to me, nothing but Cassandra. The day Natasha became Blaze.

## **2016**

Pain. The first thing I felt was pain, searing me from the inside out. My skin felt as if it had been set on fire, and the stench of charred flesh filled my nostrils. Something was mauling me on the inside, tearing at my organs. I knew I was dying, but death never came and the pain carried on and on. Pure torture.

Suddenly it all disappeared. Everything inside me died. My love, my soul, my conscience—even my memories, even the secrets—all of it. Everything in my mind got wiped clean. I was no longer me. Just black and dark.

Then came the thirst. An unbearable, excruciating craving. I didn't know what was happening, but I didn't like the scorching dryness of my throat. It was enough to make me lose my mind.

I jumped up from the bed and rammed into something solid. I scurried up the wall until my head bumped against the ceiling, wanting to get away from whatever I had rammed into.

I waited to hear the pounding of my racing heart in my chest, waited to feel the thrumming of my pulse against my skin, but none of that came. Strangely, I was calm. I was supposed to be dead, but there I was, doing something quite impossible. Clinging to a wall. Defying gravity.

I looked down from my position in the corner of the room.

Four pale figures with dark blood-red eyes stared up at me. Light flickered, burning my eyes, but I kept staring. My breath came out in fast rasps, when abruptly I realized I didn't need to breathe. My heart wasn't beating, so why was I breathing?

One of the figures, a woman with a pale, oval face, gazed straight into my eyes. Her hair was black and shiny, and her eyes were wide as if in surprise. A sense of peace and belonging overpowered me, but then my internal senses heightened and my skin crawled. *I can't trust it, not one bit.* I tried to remember who she was, but I couldn't. All I knew was that I shouldn't trust them.

The man next to her lay a warning hand on her shoulder as if to halt her, though she hadn't yet moved. He also had crimson eyes and he was tall and lean with golden-blond hair.

An older man stood in the corner. He seemed upset; the hard lines forming on his face made me question everything about this room. A tall figure stood on my left. I quickly moved toward him until his pale skin was inches from my face. His cologne smelled sickeningly sweet, like candy.

I retreated back to my corner, but after a few seconds, I realized I hadn't moved at all. I was still perched motionlessly in the corner of the ceiling. It was my eyesight. My vision was perfectly clear and could focus sharply on tiny things impossibly far away. My sense of smell was keen, too keen really; I wrinkled my nose at the realization that I could smell *everything* in the room if I focused on it.

And only now did I realize something that would have made my heart hammer in my chest if I'd still had a pulse: I was pinned against the wall. I couldn't move. My hands and feet were stuck like glue against the surface.

"Natasha," the woman said.

*My name is Natasha?* Why didn't it feel right?

She continued in an angelic voice, "What you are experiencing right now is normal."

I cocked my head sideways and regarded her, my incredible eyesight drinking in her features. Her soft, pale skin mesmerized me. She was uncommonly beautiful, but danger emanated from her.

"Who's Natasha?" The thought escaped my lips and my own voice stunned me. It sounded sweet, like a song, like a lie. It didn't feel natural. What the hell had happened to me?

The woman stepped a couple of paces forward with her hand reached out toward me, gentle, as if approaching a spooked farm animal. "You don't remember who you are?"

I stared at her, silent.

The corner of her mouth raised slightly, but not so much that the others could see. I cocked my head again and the curves disappeared.

"My name is Cassandra. I'm your creator."

"Creator?" I frowned. What did she mean by that?

"Yes. Do you not remember what happened earlier tonight?"

"Cassandra, what is this?" the man leaning against the wall in the corner asked. "Why doesn't she remember?"

"Shh, Darius," she ordered without taking her eyes off mine. To my surprise, the man subsided.

The woman spoke to me again. "You are safe, Natasha. You can come down from there. I promise no one will hurt you." Something in her voice, her entire being, told me she wasn't a threat, that I could trust this crimson-eyed beauty.

I swallowed hard. The dryness of my throat had formed a nauseating lump. My left foot moved first, then my right arm. Getting up had been a lot easier than getting down.

I lost my grip and landed on all fours like a cat. My balance was out-of-this-world perfect. I turned around, searching my backside for a tail, but of course there was nothing.

I looked up at the four of them. The men all stood in front of Cassandra, nearly forming a wall before her, as if they were protecting her. I glanced around the room, and it all started to make sense. They were protecting her from me.

I got up slowly. The dryness in my throat was now unbearable, and I needed to ease it. A vase with wilted flowers caught my eye, and with a swift movement, I grabbed it. I dumped the flowers on the ground and gulped down the stale water. When the last droplet of water slid down my throat, I groaned in frustration. The thirst was more insistent than ever. Nausea twisted and turned in my stomach, and I doubled over as water and bile made its way up my esophagus. I heaved and heaved until my guts seemed satisfied that the vile liquid was completely gone.

"What's wrong with me?" I moaned through a coughing fit, spitting on the floor.

"Water won't quench your thirst." Cassandra crouched down in front of me. "Bring in her first meal."

"Cassandra!"

"She needs to feed, Darius."

"She doesn't even know what she is," Darius's voice was hostile, but his tone didn't seem to bother Cassandra.

She seemed unfazed as she stared at me with pure admiration. Her friendly smile told me that I had no need to worry, that everything would be okay. "She'll soon discover that by herself."

A deliciously sweet aroma filled my nostrils. It came with a beating drum. I'd never smelled anything so heavenly before. My stomach growled and my lips became dryer. I turned my gaze in the direction of the beautiful smell.

It was a girl. She seemed terrified. Some sort of clear, salty-smelling liquid rolled from her eyes down her cheeks. Somehow, I knew *liquid* wasn't the right word, but my memory offered no other words. It was strange, but my mind seemed to be selective when it came to what I needed to know.

The scent of the girl was so enticing that I was nearly salivating—or would have been if I had any saliva to spare.

The drumming beat louder and louder. I covered my ears with my hands, hoping it would tamp down the sound.

Cassandra, having come out from behind her wall of protectors without my noticing, touched my hands and eased them to my sides. "Don't try to silence the sound. It's who you are. Use it. When the beating stops, you stop."

I squinted, not understanding a word. Something sharp pricked my lips from the inside. A shot of hot liquid ran down my throat. Blood, my blood, coating my throat.

I had to get more. My tongue glided over my teeth and stopped when it met a deadly sharp fang.

Realization struck, sudden and complete. What I was jolted through me. Instinct took over.

A horrible shriek left the fragile little creature in front of me as I took two swift leaps and connected with her body. Her bones shattered under my grip, but the sound didn't stop me from sinking my teeth into her neck. When my fangs pierced her flesh, warm blood filled my mouth. I moaned with satisfaction as it flowed down my throat, easing the scorching pain. I bit harder and sucked thirstily. The drumming beat slowed, growing fainter and fainter before completely fading away.

"Natasha," Cassandra yelled as I kept drinking. An ache formed in the pit of my stomach, but I couldn't stop my feast.

"Natasha," she yelled again. Something slammed into my body. My fangs were wrenched from the girl's neck. I flew through the air and crashed against the wall.

I was immediately on my feet. My mind was clouded. A flicker on my hand caught my eye. It was captivating. I lifted my hand and admired the hot flame dancing in my palm, watching it flick over my hand and up my wrist. For some reason, it didn't hurt me, almost as if it was part of me. An amazing sense of power settled in my core and I forgot about the lifeless girl, about being wrenched from my meal.

Whatever this flame was... it was making me powerful.

Cassandra approached me with small, tentative steps. I shifted my gaze from the flame to the corpse behind Cassandra, before looking at Cassandra. My flame disappeared as she neared me, and her lips spread into a smile.



She touched my cheek gently. I flinched away, but she touched me again and my body seemed to melt into her touch. Her hand was warm and soft; it sent a tingle all over my body.

I loved her touch.

"She's dead," Cassandra whispered in my ear. "First rule: we don't drink from the dead. You're still thirsty."

I nodded.

"Good," she said. She gestured at the door and it opened again. That drumming beat sounded in my ears again.

A male voice protested. "Cassandra, what—?"

"Darius, she needs to feed!" Cassandra glared at Darius.

He quickly shut his mouth and turned his eyes down to the ground.

My next meal was waiting. I didn't wait for instructions this time. I pounced on my meal, crushing weak bones in my grip and piercing the warm flesh. The taste was different this time, not as sweet, but still delicious. I listened to the heartbeat growing fainter. I withdrew my fangs when it faded away. I heard footsteps and the creak of leather shoes as Darius quickly walked away.

When I looked up, he was framed in the doorway. He turned and pierced Cassandra with his gaze, a warning glint in his eyes. "Don't say I didn't warn you. You never should've changed her."

Our eyes met for a fraction of a second, and I saw a flash of fear in his eyes. Fear of what, me?

He disappeared through the door.

"Dig in, my little firebird," Cassandra whispered in my ear.

My gaze fell on five other helpless figures being brought into the room.

Before the first one had a chance to blink, my teeth sank into his flesh.

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## ABOUT ADRIENNE WOODS

Adrienne is a USA Today Best Selling Author. Firebolt, book 1 of The Dragonian series is debut novel, and Dream Casters is her second series. The last novel in the Dream Caster series, Millue, will be released in 2018.

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